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TOWARDS A MYTHOLOGY

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TOWARDS A MYTHOLOGY

STUDIES IN THE POETRY OF W. B. YEATS

By

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TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER

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P. U.

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INTRODUCTION

The Muses, Apollo, Mercury, Pallas, Venus, and other such deities, represent to us nothing other than the powers of God, to Whom the first men gave several names for the diverse effects of the incomparable Majesty.

RONSARD.

For though the elder Poets, which were then the Sacred Priests, fed the world with supernaturall Tales, and so compounded their Religion of Pleasure and Mysterie, two Ingredients which never fail'd to work upon the People, . . . a Christian Poet, whose Religion little needs the aids of Invention, hath less occasion to imitate such Fables as meanly illustrate a probable Heaven by the fashion and dignity of Courts, and make a resemblance of Hell out of the Dreams of frighted Women, by which they continue and increase the melancholy mistakes of the People.

WILLIAM DAVENANT.

The great virtues, the great joys, the great privations come in the myths, and, as it were, take mankind between their naked arms and without putting off their divinity. Poets have taken their themes more often from stories that are all, or half, mythological, than from history or stories that give one the sensation of history, understanding, as I think, that the imagination which remembers the proportions of life is but a long wooing, that it has to forget them before it becomes the torch and the marriage-bed.

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS, 1902.

Does the god from his lofty shoulder see where we are going?
Is he casting lighthouse-beams to a struggling future
That has long been looking for us?

RAINER MARIA RILKE.

IN this study I have taken one small aspect of a theme which bulks very large—and is largely neglected—in literary and critical history: the interaction between poetry and mythology, which, the more it is studied in English poetry, takes on more and more the characteristics of a search, a groping after something which is obscurely felt to be indispensable, but which lies not readily to hand.[1] Dr. B. Ifor Evans goes so

[1] The nearest thing to a general survey of this theme, with due regard for its wider implications, seems to be Dr. B. Ifor Evans' *Tradition and Romanticism* (1940). Basil Willey describes the "breakdown of mythology" in his *Seventeenth Century Background*, and there are useful passages on the relations between poetry, mythology, allegory, humanism and Christianity in the studies of Spenser by C. L. Renwick (1925) and B. E. C. Davis (1933). Douglas Bush in his two immense volumes on *Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition* and *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition* (Minnesota, 1932, 1936) hunts up many "sources" but does not treat any wider implications. This also applies to other works where the authors seem reluctant to leave sure ground, such as Miss Hoare's *The Work of Morris and Yeats in relation to Early Saga Literature* and C. B. Tinker's and R. F. Lowry's *The Poetry of Matthew Arnold*.

far as to say that the absence of a native mythology is English poetry's most serious handicap.[1] In discussing the poetry of Yeats I have used the term mythology in an extended sense as describing a process as well as an object, a process which in many ways dictates the nature of the poetry which it shapes. Before, however, passing on to the detailed study of this process as it manifests itself in Yeats' work, it seems well to attempt to place it, however briefly, within a general picture of the search for a mythology in English poetry.

What is a myth, and what function does it fufil? The issue seems to be confused from the start, because we have any one of five main definitions or explanations of myth to choose from. First, myth can be defined purely as a distorted account of historical events, as when, in the theory of the culture-diffusionists, the Egyptian "Children of the Sun" myth is based on actual event in Egyptian pre-history and reproduces its pattern all over the world.[2] Or myth can be regarded as a means of explaining and describing natural phenomena, a foreshadowing of the scientific method. Thus Alexander McBain appears to think of the Druids as a kind of primitive Association for the Advancement of Science, prefiguring presumably the now somewhat tarnished Scientist of the twentieth century, who long proliferated in the imagination of H. G. Wells.[3] Thirdly, there is what may be termed the psycho-analytic theory of myth, in which myth is a description of the unconscious wishes and fantasies of individual and race. This theory, which takes its origin from the work of C. J. Jung, finds brilliant expression in the sphere of literary criticism in Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*. Then again, there is the view which looks upon myth as the more or less secret repository either of moral teachings or of natural and religious mysteries. That myths embodied secret moral lessons was one of the first explanations advanced, and myth was thereby reduced to the status of allegory. The locus classicus for this view is Bacon's *De Sapientia Veterum* but Sidney and many others shared it. Contemporaneously with it went the view that myths attempted to describe natural phenomena,

[1] *op. cit*, p. 149.

[2] See the works of W. J. Perry.

[3] McBain, *Celtic Mythology and Religion* (1917). Cf. T. D. Kendrick, *The Druids* (1927), who suggests that the Celtic legends are "not the outcome of a religious philosophy but the sequel to normal primitive speculation."

and while Christianity helped to demolish the one, science rendered the other superfluous. In Dr. Evans' words :

> Once science had invited attention to its own anatomy of the world, the fables, mythologies, and even all the hierarchies of sentiments and images, which poets had used, seemed unacceptable and childish. (*op. cit.* p. 44.)

The view that myth conceals certain religious mysteries, that it expresses also the "rules of conduct of a given religious or social group," appears in a quite recent work, Denis de Rougemont's *Passion and Society* (*L'Amour et l'Occident*), 1939, where the Tristan and Isolde myth is shown to conceal doctrines and rules of conduct anathematized by the Church and therefore driven underground :

> A myth arises whenever it becomes dangerous or impossible to speak plainly or frankly about certain social or religious matters or affective relations, and yet there is a desire to preserve the doctrine on these matters.[1]

Related to this view is Lord Raglan's conviction that myths are the stage of development occurring between ritual and drama. A myth is a description of what happens in a ritual ; thus the widespread myth of the resurrection of the tribal hero or dying god is a description of a tribal initiation ceremony.[2]

In this welter of conflicting theory, it is impossible to discover where the truth lies. Fortunately, the study of the interaction of mythology and literature can proceed without our waiting for the anthropologists to sort out the muddle. Rougemont is obviously right when he declares—and his words can be applied especially to certain poets—that "the most profound characteristic of a myth is the power which it gains over us, usually without our knowing."

[1] *op. cit.*, p. 26. With Rougemont's view can be compared that of Henry Reynolds, the author of *Mythomystes* (1632), where Reynolds, however, propounds a different reason for secrecy, applying neo-Platonism to the interpretation of poetry and myth (Spingarn, *Critical Essays of the XVIIth Century*, I. p. 141 sqq.) : "high and Mysticall matters should by riddles and enigmaticall knotts be kept inviolate from the prophane Multitude . . . Orpheus within the foults and involvements of fables hid the misteries of his doctrine, and dissembled them under a poeticke maske."

[2] Lord Raglan, *The Hero* (1935). Cf. J. E. Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual.*

To demonstrate and explain, however, this power of myth is not an easy task because it perforce carries us outside the sphere of literary criticism. Poets have used almost identical phrases to describe that which lies at the root of their perceptions, which obscurely guides and inspires them—as when Wordsworth speaks of the " hiding-places " and Yeats of the " sources " of " power." Other poets, such as Rilke with his Angels, and Hölderlin with his Greek gods, have invented whole systems and composed many poems not about objects —trees, or people, or landscapes,—but about their own inner landscapes within which move these mysterious figures and incalculable deities. As Rilke wrote of Hölderlin :

> Look how they all
> live at home in their cosy poems and make long stays
> in narrow comparisons. Participators. You only
> move like the moon. And below there brightens and darkens
> your own nocturnal, sacredly startled landscape.[1]

Such poets are preoccupied with the fact that they are poets. They are busy exploring a world whose " otherness," compared with the world of our ordinary perceptions, is complete and absolute. As Rilke again has written :

> He calls it up. It shrinks together. Stays.
> What stays ? The Other ; everything outside him
> becomes a creature.[2]

Yeats undoubtedly shares some of the characteristics of this kind of poet, although his voice lacks the curious ringing beauty of Rilke's, nor is his imagination sufficiently powerful or sufficiently constricted to form the nightmare images of a Hölderlin or a Baudelaire.

> Exposed on the hills of the heart. Look, how small there !
> look, the last hamlet of words, and, higher,
> (but still how small !) yet one remaining
> farmstead of feeling : d'you see it ?
> Exposed on the hills of the heart. Bare rock
> under the hands.[3]

If Rilke is a flower blooming on that rock, or a bell sounding

[1] Rilke, *Later Poems*, trans. J. B. Leishman, p. 63.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 44. [3] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

from the last farmstead, Yeats is a gong banging away somewhere at the approaches to the mountain.

To such poets mythology is a form of expression and representation peculiarly valuable. In a myth unexplained overtones and undertones of meaning and tantalizing obscurity are united with clear-cut images, acts and situations whose mysteriousness lies in their very exactitude, their formal and ritualistic significance. They absolve the poet from the shoddy vagueness of half-conceived images, while at the same time they close the door upon no genuine mystery. And over all of them lies this unknown power, the profound hold which the myth exercises on certain kinds of imagination. The matter can be put at its simplest by saying that mythology is a prolific source of good stories, of which the poet who has set himself the task of describing the inner landscape of his being itself, whose job is to encourage, in Rilke's words, the "flowering of our inwardness", stands in more need than the poet to whom the outer landscape, the impact of the world upon his senses or upon itself, is the first consideration. Just as a religious idea is made dynamic through the myth of Genesis, so this inner landscape, if it is to be translated into poetry, needs a story, a framework of action and event, at once sufficiently firm to support passion and conflict, and sufficiently plastic for its meaning to be adapted to suit the personal poetic end. In this study I have tried to show that Yeats uses the myth in this way, that in it and by its means he unites the abstract idea with the personal passion and the personal meaning, and so resolves an otherwise frustrating dualism into poetry.

It appears, however, from the history of English poetry, that the mythology must have some genuine roots. It must be really a mythology, a creation of the common mind and part of the inherited tradition of the poet. Only so does it seem able to exercise the mysterious influence of which Rougemont speaks. Now there are few phases in English poetry in which the flourishing of a mythology suitable for such use was not disturbed by external factors. The outcome is that poets have to create their own mythology, and so fail in their purpose—Blake is the classical example of this failure. His myths are a hotch-potch, created by his left hand so that his right hand may wring poetry from them, and the result is dismal indeed. Judging from the history of English poetry,

a mythology is invented when the only mythological stories available (that is, still exercising their ancient power) embody ideas too sacredly linked with specific religious meanings to permit of the adaptation that the poet demands, or when they have become too trivial and outworn and offensive to taste. In England many factors reinforced the tendency towards a breakdown of mythology: the Puritan worship of the Sacred Book combined with the rise of the scientific *Weltanschauung* to obscure the dim realization of the fact that neither the myths of the Bible nor the myths of Hellas are meant to be literal representations of events. They are sketches of the inner landscape of the race. The reasoning was that as the word of God, the story of Genesis was literally true, therefore the story of Zeus and Chronos was not only untrue, but a wicked perversion concocted by the Enemy of Man to lure him to destruction. The poets therefore must meddle with neither, in case they distort the one and publicize the other. It was not realized that the story of Genesis was exactly the same kind of manipulation of experience as that achieved by the poet when he speaks in terms of image of an event that has occurred in his consciousness. No one could be found who would suppose that "Resolution and Independence" is valuable because it gives us information about a curious local industry practised in the Lake District towards the close of the eighteenth century. Between the belief that "God created the world" and the belief that "God created the world in six days" lies half the history of Europe, yet the gap is no bigger than that between poetry and prose:

> Incendiary or bigot could be found
> To burn that stump on the Acropolis,
> Or break in bits the famous ivories . . .

It is the breakdown of the mythology that causes the search for a mythology, for the function of mythology is not confined to the interaction of its racial images with the poetic inner landscape. By using the myth—provided the myth really does hold a central position in the culture of his age, and is not merely a series of broken ornaments or a phalanx of ecclesiastical buildings which no one must live in—the poet is making contact with the inherited tradition that is alive and around him, and is thus drawing strength from it. As Mr. Eliot observes:

> In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. . . . It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to have been conscious.[1]

The use of the myth brings order and tradition, comprehensibility and unity, into poetry. This is what Yeats in particular derived from the national Irish mythology, for he was fortunate in having to hand a mythology which the Irish Renaissance had to some extent revivified and on to which he was able to graft new members. The succeeding chapters attempt to show not only how this mythology was used, but how it was adapted to a developing concept, and how the search for a mythology itself brought to birth a mythologizing process which in its turn evolved a new myth to fulfil the functions of the old.

[1] Quoted by Dr. Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

CHAPTER I

Cuchulain

Leur toile spirituelle,
Je la brise, et vais cherchant
Dans ma forêt sensuelle
Les oracles de mon chant.

Valéry.

The Cuchulain theme had perhaps a more enduring influence on the poetry of Yeats than any other Irish mythological subject. The significances that he distilled from it changed colour and direction as his work developed, and the " Cuchulain Comforted " of *Last Poems*, written in the very month of his death, shows that the theme had not lost its hold upon the poet's imagination. The Cuchulain series of plays begins with what is probably Yeats' most effective stage play, *On Baile's Strand* (1904); and continues through four more plays, each in its way important: *The Green Helmet* of 1910, *At the Hawk's Well* (1917), the first of the plays to imitate the Japanese Nō tradition, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919) and, finally, *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939). Amongst the poems we find the early and later much revised tale of " Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea " (*The Rose*, 1893).

Cuchulain, greatest of the champions of Ulster, is the central figure of the Red Branch cycle of tales which contains the Irish Iliad—the great epic of the *Táin Bó Cúailgne*—and is related to the earliest surviving Irish literature, the stories of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the pre-historic gods of Eire. Of these gods Lugh was the chief, and Cuchulain claimed Lugh as his father—Eleanor Hull indeed describes him as Lugh reborn.[1] Subsidiary to the *Táin Bó Cúailgne* are a number of tales describing other events in the life of Cuchulain and his followers. " Might I not," wrote Yeats in *The Trembling of the Veil*, " with health and good luck to aid me, create some new *Prometheus Unbound*; Patrick or Columbkil, Oisin or Fion, in Prometheus' stead;

[1] *A Text Book of Irish Literature* (1907), from which most of the information concerning early Irish literature is taken.

and instead of Caucasus, Cro-Patric or Ben Bulben ? " Yeats realized this ambition only partially, but the Ulster champion had an obvious claim to play the part of an Achilles or a Prometheus in a new " heroic " and " popular " art. Cuchulain always retained for Yeats his value as a national symbol right up to the time when he wrote of " Pearse summoning Cuchulain to his side."

On Baile's Strand is essentially a simple transposition of the story of Cuchulain's quarrel with Conchubar, his slaying of his own son and subsequent madness and death, into a play suitable for performance on the Abbey stage. The long poem " Cuchulain's fight with the sea " is basically the same tale, but marked by many differences of detail and approach. The poem, unlike the play, is not so much the story of a tragic action as a series of variations on a tragic theme, and is typical of most of the early work in its emphasis on the moods arising from the events rather than on the events themselves. The opening of the 1899 version strikes the note of weariness :

> A man came slowly from the setting sun
> To Forgail's daughter, Emer, in her dun,
> And found her dyeing cloth with subtle care,
> And said, casting aside his draggled hair . . .[1]

All this is characteristic. (And characteristic too are the revisions—or rather rewritings—later made : in 1899, for example, Emer ordered the bearer of ill tidings to be beaten with thongs of hide ; in 1934 she smites him herself " with raddled fist "). The characters are passing like a dream ; the hero fades into silence, his life the cry of a bird among the sleepy shades :

> In three days' time, Cuhoollin with a moan
> Stood up, and came to the long sands alone :
> For four days warred he with the bitter tide ;
> And the waves flowed above him, and he died.

But as the mists of this poem dislimn, the Cuchulain theme itself stands out in Yeats' mind in bolder relief. *On Baile's Strand* begins differently enough from the poem, with a fool and a blind man at odds about their dinner, while throughout the play Yeats is plainly trying hard for effective stage moments, and not without success. There is no need to enumerate these

[1] Version in *Poems* (London : T. Fisher Unwin, 1899).

moments again.[1] The vigorous vocabulary and the traditional but forceful blank verse show how the Cuchulain theme lends itself to the new conceptions.

> ' Twas you who did it—you who sat up there
> With your old rod of kingship, like a magpie
> Nursing a stolen spoon,

writes the poet who was later to speak of " great-bladdered " Emer and " Usna's boys." If the language of *Deirdre* indicates a model in late Jacobean drama, the pithy metaphors of this play, its occasional startling vigour owe something to *Antony and Cleopatra*, especially in the dialogue between Cuchulain and his son or in the affectionate yet terrible speech to his sword :

> How many of you would meet
> This mutterer, this old whistler, this sand-piper,
> This edge that's greyer than the tide, this mouse
> That's gnawing at the timbers of the world.

It is evident indeed throughout the play that Yeats' technique is Elizabethan or Jacobean, his aim the effective presentation of the mythological subject in terms of character and action. The preoccupation with mood has gone and the old story has shown itself adaptable to the new idea. That Yeats was aware of this and yet at the same time uneasy about the real value of the play is disclosed by his references many years later in " The Circus Animals' Desertion," one of the finest of his last poems :

> And when the Fool and Blind Man stole the bread
> Cuchulain fought the ungovernable sea ;
> Heart-mysteries there, and yet when all is said
> It was the dream itself enchanted me :
> Character isolated by a deed
> To engross the present and dominate memory.
> Players and painted stage took all my love,
> And not those things that they were emblems of.

We shall return to this significant passage later. It is enough to say here that the whole development of the Cuchulain theme

[1] Mr. Menon has already done this quite well (see *The Development of W. B. Yeats*). One must join issue with him on his opinion that the last remark of the Blind Man is a " terrible anti-climax." On the contrary it is the final flourish of the dramatic convention for whose sake the " low " characters are in the play at all.

in Yeats' hands is really summed up in this masterly stanza. The reference to the fool and the blind man emphasizes the significance with which Yeats endowed these two characters. The talents of the Fays, the collaboration of Lady Gregory, provide only a half-explanation of their presence and prominence. They not only supply the peasant setting in which the heroic characters gleam like jewels, they are also a kind of tragic chorus whose unwitting malice and unwise knowledge bring about the catastrophe. Because at the same time they lack the chill and lofty detachment, the observant pity of the three Musicians of the Nō plays, they show not only that Yeats is still preoccupied with the needs of the real theatre, but also that his treatment of the original theme is still reasonably close to the spirit of Bard and Fine. The gross and earthy humour of the Red Branch tales, their primitive violence and chivalry—of which we can catch a glimpse in Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, so highly praised by Yeats—are still there to salt the dish, even though Yeats' or Lady Gregory's peasants and half-wits, like Shakespeare's fools and soldiers, are essentially the stylized creations of author and actor. Indeed, the fact that Yeats was to stylize his low characters to a much greater degree later on shows how much nearer these earlier creations are to the true folk. No doubt it was of *On Baile's Strand* amongst other plays that Lady Gregory was thinking when she wrote in *Our Irish Theatre* that the Irish Movement " was the discovery, the disclosure of the folk learning, the folk tradition. Our theatre was caught in that current, and it is that current which had brought it on its triumphant way . . . It has not only the great mass of primitive material and legend to draw on but it has been made a living thing by the excitement of that discovery." [1]

The developments foreshadowed in *On Baile's Strand* are not much further advanced by the next play in the Cuchulain series, *The Green Helmet*, a play as difficult to classify as it is to appreciate. Its unappealing and awkward metre is not suited to the Yeatsian genre, but it was perhaps of this play Yeats was thinking when he wrote : " Cuchulain seemed to me a heroic figure because he was creative joy separated from fear." The period of the traditional, semi-realist and popular Abbey plays

[1] Quoted by A. D. M. Hoare : *The Works of Morris and Yeats in Relation to Early Saga Literature*.

which concluded with *On Baile's Strand* and *Deirdre* was over for good, and in this work the dramatist seems to be uneasily wondering what he should do next. The source of the story is the *Feast of Bricriu*, one of the Cuchulain stories which are grouped as subsidiary to the *Táin Bó Cúailgne*, and Yeats handles his mythological material in yet another fashion and retreats to farce. The long passages of violent argument between the servants and the wives of the three heroes have obvious affinities with similar undignified wrangles in the Red Branch tales, and yet they lack a sensuous touch, the coarseness which gives body, almost a kind of muscular tension, to the later handling of the Cuchulain themes. How different and how dull Yeats' work later might have been is shown by this play where a temporary change in attitude has been accompanied by no corresponding change in style.

That the change was indeed only temporary is shown by the next two Cuchulain plays, *At the Hawk's Well* and *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, whose technique is that of Japanese Nō, but whose purpose, unlike that of any of the preceding works, is to explore the "heart-mysteries" of the Cuchulain myth, to grasp at the abiding significance of this master figure. In the poet's hand now is a new armoury of technique; the stylistic watershed had been passed with the *Responsibilities* volume of 1914. Yeats is no longer trying to write for that dreamt-of Irish National Theatre but is to declare himself content with an ideal audience of a hundred or so cultivated persons. Yet the Cuchulain theme is still with him; the permanent image remains although the process of withering into truth has already begun.

At the Hawk's Well is a play about the heroic nature, and in the first song of the musicians appears again that imaginary solitary man who was at once the subject and object of much of the later work. The hero Cuchulain of these lines:

> I call to the mind's eye
> Pallor of an ivory face,
> Its lofty dissolute air,
> A man climbing up to a place
> The salt sea wind has left bare.

is also the "man who does not exist, the man who is but a dream" of the "Fisherman" poem:

Climbing up to a place
Where stone is dark under froth,
And the down-turn of his wrist
When the flies drop in the stream.

Cuchulain, the Pre-Raphaelite dreamer of *The Rose*, the passionate Elizabethan or Jacobean stage-hero of *On Baile's Strand*, is in fact undergoing another transformation, but this time one in which his traditional attributes dwindle in importance and his personal distinctiveness almost vanishes. Instead Cuchulain becomes a hero-type and the play an exposition of the heroic nature. (It was no accident that Yeats chose Nō, an aristocratic, a warrior art). The old man of *At the Hawk's Well* is the foil who desires and yet fears to gain the water of life, whose want of the heroic qualities is contrasted with Cuchulain's heroic temper:

Young Man: My luck is strong,
It will not leave me waiting, nor will they
That dance among the stones put me asleep:
If I grow sleepy I can pierce my foot.
Old Man: No, do not pierce it, for the foot is tender,
It feels pain much;

and whose insensitivity to the heroic values is symbolically shown by his falling asleep during the hawk's dance. The hawk itself is here meant to represent what Yeats always regarded as the enemy of the heroic values, abstract thought, which destroys the Unity of Being, as in the poem about the yellow-eyed hawk of the mind in *The Wild Swans at Coole*.[1] The unfaltering, unmoistened eyes of the hawk dancer lead the hero type from unity of being, as represented by the plashing water in the well, and doom him henceforth to the tragedy of frustration, as prophesied by the old man. Those who have looked on the hawk fall under a curse:

That curse may be
Never to win a woman's love and keep it;
Or always to mix hatred in the love;
Or it may be that she will kill your children,
That you will find them, their throats torn and bloody,
Or you will be so maddened that you kill them
With your own hand.

All these things are in Cuchulain's dark glass.

[1] Though the hawk in this poem is meant to represent forms of political abstraction—v. *The Trembling of the Veil* (*Autobiographies*, p. 236).

We see then to what stage Yeats has brought the development of the mythological theme. He is taking the old tale and weaving into it his developing personal philosophy, yet he still retains the bones and flesh of legend—Cuchulain is still a recognizable figure, his fate still a personal and individual one. The eye of speculation has however frozen much movement out of the characters. It is useless to blame Yeats, as has so frequently been done, for throwing over the real theatre in favour of stylistic poses and an hieratic attitude: he was filled with a different purpose and looking at the old images with new eyes. A change of manner was the inevitable concomitant of the change in direction, and the theatre that Yeats needed now was at once wider in mental range, narrower in dramatic convention, than the Abbey could ever be.

If *At the Hawk's Well* has for theme the heroic apprehension of life, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* is preoccupied with heroic values of love and death. The first musician opens the play with a song in celebration of woman's beauty containing the germ of an idea that was to recur several times in the later poetry. The lines beginning "How many centuries spent" develop into "The Statues" and "A Bronze Head" of *Last Poems*, the latter poem inspired by Laurence Campbell's bust of Maud Gonne.[1] "Her face, like the face of some Greek statue," wrote Yeats of Maud Gonne, "showed little thought, her whole body seemed a master work of long labouring thought, as though a Scopas had measured and calculated, consorted with Egyptian sages, and mathematicians out of Babylon . . .'[2] When we realize that this so impersonal-seeming first musician's song celebrates the beauty of a particular woman—or the memories of that beauty—we realize also how personal is the emotion that integrates the myth. *The Only Jealousy* is derived from yet another of the subsidiary Cuchulain stories, *The Wasting-Away of Cuchulain*, a story which Yeats adapts and alters out of all recognition, retaining little of the incidents but Emer's momentary attempt to kill Fand. Instead, the mythological theme is used to present a strange drama of conflict—a conflict between human love and the abstraction of death, between Emer and the Woman of the Sidhe, "half woman and half bird of prey." Fand is like the

[1] v. Hone, *Life*, p. 470.

[2] *The Trembling of the Veil* (*Autobiographies*, p. 448).

hawk of the preceding play in that she attempts to destroy love by destroying the memories of love. She is defeated, but there is yet another conflict in the play, the human conflict between Emer and Eithne Inguba: although Emer's beauty is the result of " long, labouring thought " or has been, to use the language of " The Statues," planned by Pythagoras and shows the lineaments of a plummet-measured face, the defeat is now Emer's and her tragedy that stated by the musicians at the play's close:

> Although the door be shut
> And all seem well enough,
> Although wide world hold not
> A man but will give you his love
> The moment he has looked at you,
> He that has loved the best
> May turn from a statue
> His too human breast.

We are reminded of the lines from "A Prayer for my Daughter",

> May she be granted beauty and yet not
> Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught,
> Or hers before a looking-glass, for such,
> Being made beautiful overmuch,
> Consider beauty a sufficient end,
> Lose natural kindness and maybe
> The heart-revealing intimacy
> That chooses right . . .

and of the later lines on intellectual hatred from the same poem which seem a clear reference to the " undiminished danger " of abstract thought as manifest in such a life as Maud Gonne's.

In *The Only Jealousy*, then, the personal and the mythological are interdependent. Yeats is no longer making a play about Cuchulain so much as writing a poem with the Cuchulain story for theme. And into this poem, besides the groundwork of the Cuchulain story, enter not only certain facts of Yeats' personal experience and conviction but even the first riches from what was later to prove an abundant storehouse of poetic material—for the " system " was already in the atmosphere, and the " Babylonian mathematic starlight " was beginning to illuminate the geometrical sky. There are patches of doctrine here and there in the play:

A dream is body ;
The dead move ever towards a dreamless youth
And when they dream no more return no more,

as well as imagery drawn from the phases of the moon.

Yet the story of Cuchulain continues to prove adaptable to the changing poetic impulse, the mythological

images
That have the frenzy of our western seas

retain their ancient power. Yeats returned to the theme in the posthumously published work *The Death of Cuchulain* in which he seems consciously to gather up the other plays and include them by implication in this particular work—for the internal references to *At the Hawk's Well* and *On Baile's Strand* are numerous. The dramatist has however moved on to the last stage of satire, satire grim and tragic enough, but the writing of it shot through with the same kind of feeling as " The Circus' Animals' Desertion " :

Winter and summer till old age began
My circus animals were all on show,
Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,
Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.

The old man who speaks the long prologue in prose is a satirical self-portrait, flourishing the irritable gestures of a stylized old age, a projection into the modern world of an imagined Bard. For Time has become fluid, and the barriers between Cuchulain's Ireland and the Ireland of Pearse are thrown down. The knowledge trumpeted forth in " The Curse of Cromwell," that things " both can and cannot be,"

That the swordsmen and the ladies can still keep company,
Can pay the poet for a verse and hear the fiddle sound,
That I am still their servant though all are underground,

animates the play. The Cuchulain story itself has been turned into a bitter defeat of the heroic. Cuchulain and Eithne Inguba wrangle—the " hardness of death," to borrow a phrase of Synge's, has come between them. Aoife herself, Cuchulain's evil genius, is baulked of her final act of revenge and the great hero's head is taken by the blind man for the sake of the twelvepenny reward.

Cuchulain : Twelve pennies ! What better reason for killing a man ?
You have a knife, but have you sharpened it ?
Blind Man : I keep it sharp because it cuts my food.

The trivial has at last vanquished the heroic, and the masterful image is reduced to a mound of refuse, old iron, old bones, old rags. With *The Death of Cuchulain* Yeats brought the theme as far as it would go and by means of this play, to adopt his own metaphor, removed the last ladder.

The Cuchulain theme is brought to a full close with the defeat of the heroic character, but not before Cuchulain has again been summoned to take his place as a symbol of national Ireland.

What stood in the Post Office
With Pearse and Connolly ?
What comes out of the mountain
Where men first shed their blood,
Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed
He stood where they had stood ?

The transition from Cuchulain to Padraic Pearse is a deliberate one, and leads directly to the problem of " justifying the renowned generations " which haunted so much of Yeats' poetry in its last phase of constant brooding on his own past and that of his country. The heroic climate has passed away, the mythological subject has been turned and changed in order to shew us the symbolic destruction of the hero-type by a blind man for a twelve-penny reward—yet the fact of heroism, the fact of Parnell or of the Easter Rising remains. This is one of the paradoxes that appears to have preoccupied the ageing poet and out of which he made much remarkable verse. The problem is stated in the second of " Three Songs to the same Tune."[1] in *A Full Moon in March*, and a more personal question put in " The Man and the Echo " of *Last Poems*, but neither the historical nor the personal problem—and to a large extent they were one—was ever satisfactorily solved. At one moment Yeats expressed despair :

[1] Rewritten and published as the first of " Three Marching Songs " in *Last Poems*.

All that was sung,
All that was said in Ireland is a lie
Bred out of the contagion of the throng,
Saving the rhyme rats hear before they die.[1]

at the next a doubtful faith :

Some had no thought of victory
But had gone out to die
That Ireland's mind be greater,
Her heart mount up on high ;
And yet who knows what's yet to come ?
("Three Songs to the one Burden". *Last Poems*.)

The " heart-mysteries " of the Cuchulain mythology, then, turn out to be primarily an exploration of the heroic character and its opposing aspects. Yeats' poetry is essentially poetry about people, including himself ; his " system " of philosophy as set forth in *A Vision* is to a great degree designed to explain and test character ; his *Autobiographies* and many of his prose writings (the title *Dramatis Personae* is itself significant) are personal, anecdotal, much occupied with the lives and thoughts of the men and women he has known. More than any other kind of character, he admired that which bore the colours of heroism, whether worn by learned scholar or fighting-man ; he admired the personal gesture, the self-conscious but reckless act of daring, the bold epigrammatic thought that did not worry overmuch about consistency or good sense—and he admired all the more if such act or thought showed good taste or natural beauty : Gogarty dedicating a pair of swans to the River Liffey, O'Rahilly writing in blood on the wall of the Post Office, Cuchulain offering his head to the Red Man, Pollexfen jumping into the Bay of Biscay after an old hat. How far he raised that kind of incident and character into a new kind of personalized mythology, creating from it a fruitful source of poetic material, we shall discuss in another chapter. It remains here to say that the Cuchulain mythology itself and the fascination which it had for Yeats derived from that kind of apprehension and value. It underwent many transformations as he returned to it again and again in the course of years. In *On Baile's Strand* the interpretation of the heroic character is traditional to a great degree, passionate, straightforward—although even here the " low " characters act as foil. The

[1] " Parnell's Funeral " (*A Full Moon in March*).

tragedy is written to satisfy the need for a re-animation of the old heroic Irish psyche—none the less because Cuchulain is a doomed and frustrated figure. The two plays of the middle period are a more complex presentation of questions which are bound to arise in any prolonged study of the heroic character. Both end in tragedy in that the heroic characters—Cuchulain and Emer—are committed to a greater or less degree of frustration. Yet they retain the heroic gesture—Cuchulain leaves the stage in *At the Hawk's Well* shouldering his spear to face Aoife and the fierce women of the hills. In *The Death of Cuchulain* the mythology is used to show the heroic characters dwindling into bitterness, the play a long repetition of the question that Yeats asked in " The Man and the Echo " :

> All that I have said and done,
> Now that I am old and ill,
> Turns into a question till
> I lie awake night after night,
> And never get the answers right.

The muscular tension of the lines is a rictus caused by a self-deriding laughter, a difficult rejection of an inherited tradition.

The Cuchulain series shows us that although Yeats started from the heroic legend, his sources of inspiration lie outside the specific details provided by the original theme. The mere fact that he did not scruple to alter his material almost beyond recognition is relevant to this point, if not particularly vital to it—the more or less strict following of the chosen material in, say, the plays of Sophocles or Racine does not mean that either dramatist handled his characters and his story as though it were the individual existences of Antigone or Phèdre rather than the passions to which they give expression that were important. But to retain the individual stance which gives validity to the central conception of any character, to hold back from the abstraction of non-individuality a character whose acts and passions are a demonstration in " minute particulars " of universal reality, to make transfiguring love appear on the stage with limbs and eyes and a turn of the head or dress characteristic of a unique and not-to-be-repeated human identity, or heroism to fight with a sword of Spain not of metaphor, a shield fashioned in fifth-century Greece or twelfth-century Eire, is a central problem of the dramatist whose concern is to bring his audience into contact with that reality

"whereon the gazing heart doubles its might." Yeats' inspiration and subject matter in the Cuchulain series were not the champion of Ulster but the nature and quality of heroism. Because he intended to understand and describe, and to move his hearers with the understanding and description of that nature and quality, he had to find a character who was at once a unique individual and an embodiment of the quality of heroism. Here the mythological figure has a strange advantage over any other. Because a mythology is the creation of the racial imagination—a half-explanation, impressively Yeatsian, of a process which is largely unknown—the mythological figure serves as both individual and type. Individual, because the imagination of the race being a poetic imagination does not function in terms of philosophical abstractions, and yet type, because the main impulses that go to the creation of myth are the desire to explain phenomena or to justify social relationships or to reduce religious truths to an order and a pattern capable of being grasped by the poetic imagination. In the myth passion and abstraction join hands, the individual and the type cohere in a unity of balance. "Passion could bring character enough," wrote Yeats in that richly obscure poem "The Statues," where "imagined love" informs the numbers of Pythagoras. The creation of myth is indeed the pressing of

> Live lips upon a plummet-measured face.

In his dramatic treatment of themes from Irish mythology—and especially in the Cuchulain series, which we have taken as a type of the rest and where indeed much of the heroic struggle is concerned with the fight against abstractions, the abstractions of intellect or of death,—Yeats is preoccupied with the artistic task which he described in metaphor drawn from a boyish recollection, with a unification similar to that of the myth-maker, whose work is to carry to reader or audience

> Not such as are in Newton's metaphor—
> But actual shells of Rosses' level shore.

Having reached this definition—complicated and obscured though it is by the difficulty of treating a matter so fluid and ill-defined with such brief terms of reference—we are free to consider how far Yeats extended and elaborated his purpose in other parts of his work, and what kinds of object the "actual shells" proved to be.

CHAPTER II

The Renowned Generations

> Of fair-hair'd Milton's eloquent distress,
> And all his love for gentle Lycid drown'd ;
> Of lovely Laura in her light green dress,
> And faithful Petrarch gloriously crown'd.
>
> Keats.

I

So far we have treated of the mythological subject in the accepted sense, of Yeats' handling of themes drawn from the race symbols common to the " indomitable Irishry " and expressed in their ancient classical literature. This definition of mythology must now be extended to cover material which provides a like poetic stimulus, but in which the myth derives not from the experience of the race but from that of the individual poet. How far is it legitimate to apply the term mythology to this kind of material ? Critics of Yeats—Macneice, Bowra and Daiches among them—have not hesitated to do so, but without clearly defining the new and specialized sense in which they use the old word.

In *Autobiographies*, while speaking of the influence of John Butler Yeats on his early work, the poet wrote : "I could not compose anything but a portrait and even today I constantly see people, as a portrait painter, posing them in the mind's eye before such and such a background." (p. 102.) This gives us a clue to the nature of the process which fashioned one aspect of the personalized mythology and which was to bear fruit in many fine poems. There are enough of these poems woven round the personalities of the poet's friends, ancestors, contemporaries, and they are representative of sufficient phases in Yeats' development, for us to examine them individually and to trace the way in which they are made into poetic myth ; indirectly also to reach a definition of the word myth in this context and a justification for the use of a term so liable to confusion.

The *Responsibilities* volume of 1914 opens with the dedicatory lines " Pardon, old fathers. . . ." This is a poem which will repay much study, for it is the fruit of the poetic experience of half a lifetime. Much has been made of the stylistic changes which *Responsibilities* and the poems in *The Green Helmet* collection first made manifest; much also of the " war " for the Irish Theatre and the Lane Bequest controversy in their influence on the work. All these things no doubt had their effect in toughening Yeats' fibre and in opening his eyes to the realities of Irish life.[1] Yet it is significant that " Pardon, old fathers," the first substantial victory of the new style, is not a reflection of the contemporary Irish quarrel but a summation of an older and partly inherited experience, that experience described with such tender care in *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*, published in this same year 1914. In this unjustly neglected masterpiece lies much of the raw material of later poems. Some verses in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* run :

> My horse's flanks are spurred
> By childish memories of an old cross Pollexfen,
> And of a Middleton, whose name you never heard,
> And of a red-haired Yeats whose looks, although he died
> Before my time, seem like a vivid memory.
>
> (" Under Saturn ".)

and it is this memory which animates the *Reveries*. The *Reveries* is essentially a work composed of scattered images, fragments caught in a kind of mnemonic searchlight. Many passages illustrate the truth of the poet's own judgment that " I only seem to remember things dramatic in themselves or somehow associated with unforgettable places " (*Autobiographies*, p. 39); for instance, " Between Sligo and Rosses Point, there is a tongue of land covered with coarse grass that runs out into the sea or the mud according to the state of the tide. It is the place where dead horses are buried. Sitting there, my father read me *The Lays of Ancient Rome*" (*ibid.*, p. 56). Yet momentary images such as this are bound into an artistic whole by the ancestors and contemporaries who move through the pages. These are revealed as the real heroes of childhood

[1] For an analysis of this aspect of Yeats' stylistic development see C. M. Bowra, *The Heritage of Symbolism* (1943).

and youth, the animating figures which bestow order upon the formal life of the book, upon that movement which seems to pass and change as though behind a glass screen—" isolated by a dream." George Pollexfen, William Middleton, John Butler Yeats, supply the basis of human personality, the framework upon which the webs of the poet's own solipsism and melancholy are woven. This was the method that Yeats was to use in all his later recollections, and even in *The Death of Synge* (1909) a dying Titan collects and drains into himself all of the personal, the anecdotal, the contemporaneous which lies about him. The *Reveries* and " Pardon, old fathers " represent jointly Yeats' discovery of the human personality as new and vital material for his art.

In " Pardon, old fathers," indeed, he addresses these real or imagined ancestors in a style powerfully colloquial and free, and manages to convey into the few short lines a very considerable " pressure of personal emotion " without in any way diminishing our consciousness of the real existence of Pollexfen, Rector Yeats and the rest. Neither the poet nor those whom he invokes are required to surrender anything essential to our appreciation of their living reality. A glance at the dedicatory lines for the poetic version of *The Shadowy Waters* (to which the date September, 1900, is appended in the *Collected Poems*) will show how far Yeats has travelled. The verses in *The Shadowy Waters* do not lack charm or authentic power :

> I walked among the seven woods of Coole,
> Shan-walla, where a willow-bordered pond
> Gathers the wild duck from the winter dawn ;
> Shady Kyle-Dortha ; sunnier Kyle-na-no,
> Where many hundred squirrels are as happy
> As though they had been hidden by green boughs
> Where old age cannot find them. . . .

But every now and then a line which was meant to be golden gives out the noise of lead :

> How shall I name you, immortal, mild, proud shadows ?
> I only know that all we know comes from you.

or :

> As men in the old times, before the harps began,
> Poured out wine for the high invisible ones.

The melancholy has become a shade pretentious, and we are too conscious that the garden-close in which it flourished, the garden-close of Morris' imagination, had a censored existence somewhere in that part of Chiswick called Bedford Park. The achievement of "Pardon, old fathers" lies in its expression of a not less distinguished melancholy in terms of the collective personalities of the ancestors and the outspoken sorrow of the poet. Here again Yeats is looking back, but his vision suffers no refraction from the exhausted gestures of a pre-Raphaelitism that had never come to terms with this "preposterous, pragmatical pig of a world." He writes as one who has deepened his emotional response to the human personae and to the man-made tradition which must in the last resort bear fruit in the courageous individual, the solitary or the heroic man, merchant and scholar, trooper or sea-captain. That Yeats' ancestors were—or that he imagined they were—men of this kind, bound to him by hereditary and environmental association, is significant and fortunate; for the discovery of the human personality, made manifest in the *Reveries* and "Pardon, old fathers," was to lead to the making of many more poems and bring about an immeasurable transformation of poetic meaning.

This discovery had a large share in influencing the development of the new style, which every critic has noted but of which few have attempted to explain the causes. Yeats himself was aware of the direction which his work had taken: "We should ascend," he wrote, in commenting upon the change in himself and his work, "out of common interests, the thoughts of the newspapers, of the market-place, of men of science, but only so far as we can carry the normal, passionate, reasoning self, the personality as a whole."[1] The circumstances of the Ireland of his time and the part that Yeats played in them no doubt opened dream-heavy eyelids, but the fact that Yeats could prepare and discharge such effective grapeshot as the satirical epigrams in *The Green Helmet* and *Responsibilities*, does not mean that Yeats, in his poetic personality at least, came to share the outlook of the commercial man, or had much sympathy with the half-digested hatreds and simplifications of Young Ireland. It must not be forgotten, even in considering these early phases of the work, that those opened

[1] *The Cutting of an Agate* (1919), p. 74.

eyes were later and with increasing frequency to be fixed with a fierce and somnambulistic stare on things and places of whose existence Sir Charles Gavan Duffy and the officials of Dublin Castle were quite unaware. The discovery of the personality banished Fergus and the deep wood's woven shade, but the basic tendencies of Yeats' mind prevented the commonplace and easily recognizable from taking their place. And the poetry which this discovery released into the flood of Yeats' creative power took a direction and form which eventually brought Yeats back into a position curiously and harshly divorced from realism.

"The Grey Rock," the poem which opens the *Responsibilities* volume, is an ambitious work addressed to Yeats' "companions of the Cheshire Cheese," the Rhymers' Club, many of whose members Yeats was later to describe as "The Tragic Generation." In its combination of autobiography and Celtic mythology it is plainly transitional; the celebration of the personality and its standards has not yet won through to the particular idiom towards which it is struggling. The structure of the Goban fable and the way in which it is told—through verse dialogue and the exploitation of one dramatic situation after another—gives evidence of the stage technique. Yeats wears both buskin and laurel. The atmosphere too is a stage atmosphere; the haunting effectiveness of the intercourse between Sidhe and mortal, often used in the Cuchulain series of plays, is at least half the poet's interest. But the story, like *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, is made to carry a primary meaning, whose abstractions although entirely encased in character and image, can be clearly perceived behind the action. The theme is the rejection of the inhuman spiritual in favour of that in human life which is heroical and passionate, and which, it is implied, because conditional on death and time, is only to be found in a human context. This idea in all its endless variations is so much a part of Yeats' make-up that we shall meet it everywhere, and there is scarcely a page of the later poems in which it is not implicit. The idea, its nature, and the conflicts it must arouse are found in "Demon and Beast" (*Michael Robartes and the Dancer*). Here the poet experiences a momentary freedom from hatred and desire, but in spite of the "sweetness" that springs therefrom, is unable intellectually to accept the experience as valuable. A problem of this kind was

associated in Yeats' mind with Christian belief, and the poem ends with an uncertain affirmation :

> O what a sweetness strayed
> Through barren Thebaid,
> Or by the Mareotic sea
> When that exultant Anthony
> And twice a thousand more
> Starved upon the shore
> And withered to a bag of bones !
> What had the Cæsars but their thrones ?[1]

Some of the religious implications of this theme are treated in the seventh and eighth (" Must we part, Von Hügel ") poems in " Vacillation " (*The Winding Stair*), and some of its philosophical repercussions in the third section of " The Tower " :

> And I declare my faith :
> I mock Plotinus' thought
> And cry in Plato's teeth,
> Death and life were not
> Till man made up the whole,
> Made lock, stock and barrel
> Out of his bitter soul.

The further treatment and development of this theme will be discussed later, but it is interesting, if not entirely unexpected, to find it in " The Grey Rock," in conjunction with what we have called the discovery of personality, and consciously linked by the poet with the personalities of the men of the Rhymers' Club whom he knew. The method of treatment in " The Grey Rock " is diffuse, the apprehension of the abstract theme as expressed through the Goban myth and of the personality as expressed through the invocatory passages to Dowson and Johnson, operates on two fronts whose relationship is not fully integrated. The poet hops, skips and jumps from one to the other. But much of the material to be used in later poems of this type is there, although the crucible is not sufficiently hot for the various elements to be broken down into a genuine unity.

[1] Anthony here, of course, is the Anthony of whom Flaubert wrote. Yeats more than once took his " Thebaid or Mareotic Sea " as a symbol of the Christian cosmos, as in *Autobiographies*.

Even in " The Grey Rock," though, we see signs of the breaking-down process in the curious overtones of meaning which the invocatory passages carry. To Dowson and Johnson, he says :

> (You) never made a poorer song
> That you might have a heavier purse,
> Nor gave loud service to a cause
> That you might have a troop of friends.

Yeats himself is

> in no good repute
> With the loud host before the sea.

These lines have application to the tragic generation, but they also bear a more vital personal meaning. They are echoes and anticipations of the poems which were written out of the new knowledge of Ireland, of " theatre business, management of men," and of the refusal of Dublin to accept the Lane Bequest—echoes of poems like " To a Shade," " Paudeen " and " To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing."

In " The Grey Rock " then Yeats is writing of three separate but inter-related themes. Their adherence to one another is loose, but even so the structure of the poem is vertebral : it is predominantly of the men of the Rhymers' Club that the poet is thinking. The personalities themselves are vague—little more than a name or two and a scattered personal tradition. The pressure of the abstract idea and the undercurrent of autobiographical feeling together make but a faint thrust against these personalities, but already we see in outline the method which Yeats was to make particularly his own. Dowson and Johnson and their companions are already being raised to that lofty eminence where they are more than men, where, without losing their flesh-and-blood being or their personal gestures, they become symbols of a reality which is made to reduce phenomena to an absolute order.

Dowson and Johnson, as it happens, provide in the end a less clear-cut example of this transformation, because in their case it is brought about in prose, not verse. That section of *The Trembling of the Veil* called " The Tragic Generation " contains one of the most curious aspects of Yeats' apprehension of the nature of his contemporaries. When it was composed, Yeats' head was full of the " system," and Dowson, Johnson,

Henley, Wilde, Beardsley, Davidson, MacGregor Mathers become in turn textbook examples of the lunar phases. The Phases, in this context at least, are essentially the product of a philosophy of history, of history interpreted through the kinds of man. The discovery of the personality has evolved into a delight in the creature so abundant that the individual personality has become the basis of all historical movement, and the nature of the individual the focus of every kind of significance. We shall examine the "system" in its relation to the verse in greater detail in another chapter: it is sufficient to say here that in this part of the system Yeats has created an elaborate structure of myth to explain and illustrate the variations of historical types.[1] The men of the Rhymers' Club have become the outward manifestations of this structure. Speaking analogously, they resemble the sculptured saints and martyrs on a Gothic cathedral, while the cathedral itself is to be regarded as the expression in spatial terms of the divine coherence of the universe. The hints and fragments from the "system" are used by Yeats to make an absolute judgement on his contemporaries and to include them in a pattern which will smooth out the cruel unintelligibilities of history:

> I can no more justify my convictions in these brief chapters than Shakespeare could justify within the limits of a sonnet, his conviction that the soul of the wide world dreams of things to come; and yet as I have set out to describe nature as I see it, I must not only describe events but those patterns into which they fall, when I am the looker-on. (*Autobiographies*, p. 407.)

In this pattern Beardsley becomes "a man of the thirteenth Phase, his nature on the edge of Unity of Being, the understanding of that Unity by the intellect his one overmastering purpose." The particular examples are linked to a broader historical conception, by which all the Rhymers as a group are related to the mythological structure and become the living heroes of the abstract idea—"But men who belong by nature to the nights near to the full are still born, a tragic

[1] It may be remarked that Yeats is here making myth the means of explaining phenomena. Myth is a kind of science. According to one school of cultural anthropologists this is the paramount function of myth in primitive society. See Alexander MacBain, *Celtic Mythology and Religion* (1917), and the works of W. J. Perry and others.

minority. . . ." It is impossible to disregard the power, the grand and mannered movement of those passages in which Yeats' integration of mythological system and historical examples is most complete:

> Somewhere about 1450, though later in some parts of Europe by a hundred years or so, and in some earlier, men attained to personality in great numbers, "Unity of Being," and became like a "perfectly proportioned human body," and as men so fashioned held places of power, their nations had it too, prince and ploughman sharing that thought and feeling. What afterwards showed for rifts and cracks were there already, but imperious impulse held all together. Then the scattering came, the seeding of the poppy, bursting of pea-pod, and for a time personality seemed but the stronger for it. Shakespeare's people make all things serve their passion, and that passion is for the moment the whole energy of their being—birds, beasts, men, women, landscape, society, are but symbols and metaphors, nothing is studied in itself, the mind is a dark well, no surface, depth only. The men that Titian painted, the men that Jongsen painted, even the men of Van Dyck, seemed at moments like great hawks at rest. In the Dublin National Gallery there hung, perhaps there still hang, upon the same wall, a portrait of some Venetian gentleman by Strozzi, and Mr. Sargent's painting of President Wilson. Whatever thought broods in the dark eyes of that Venetian gentleman has drawn its life from his whole body; it feeds upon it as the flame feeds upon the candle—and should that thought be changed, his pose would change, his very cloak would rustle for his whole body thinks. President Wilson lives only in the eyes, which are steady and intent; the flesh about the mouth is dead, and the hands are dead, and the clothes suggest no movement of his body nor any movement but that of the valet, who has brushed and folded in mechanical routine.[1]

This passage is a key to the understanding of much in Yeats' thought. History is here treated as a matter of personality; group nomenclature and historical labels are alike avoided. Many of the sentences are echoes and anticipations of the verses wherein Yeats reflects with a like particularity on the

[1] *The Trembling of the Veil*, Book IV, Sec. 3 (*Autobiographies*, pp. 359–60).

nature and dissolution of societies, as in the poem "To a Wealthy Man" (*Responsibilities*) or "Meru" (*A Full Moon in March*):

> man's life is thought,
> And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
> Ravening through century after century,
> Ravening, raging and uprooting that he may come
> Into the desolation of reality.

The echo from Donne in the prose passage was a theme which Yeats treated in many variations. His praise is always for the integral personality, for the man whose very quality of being brings with it the necessary virtues, where life is like a perfectly proportioned human body, and the basic dualism does not split the elements apart, but unifies them, to adopt Macmurray's phrase, in a fruitful tension. In the true society men do not live "in a portion of themselves." In Europe, for some centuries, Yeats tells us, there has been no cultivated society; the meaning of the word culture has been debased until it implies little more than a top-dressing, something added by technical experts after the soil has been prepared. Yeats railed against the delusion that culture is the result of schooling, and saw in this matter, as in so many others, that when a society is malformed, the disease is always organic, never of the surface. This is the reason he spoke contemptuously in his last play of "people who are educating themselves out of Book Societies and the like, sciolists all, pickpockets and opinionated bitches."

Yeats' appreciation of the undivided personality in the prose passage is related also to much in the later parts of *The Trembling of the Veil* and in the poetry, where the abundant possession of physical vigour is somehow related to the quality of body-in-itself, body existing in its own sensuous right free from dualism, and yet able in some mysterious way to possess the properties of soul and mind, to be blessed and to rule:

> Michael Angelo's Sistine roof,
> His 'Morning' and his 'Night' disclose
> How sinew that has been pulled tight,
> Or it may be loosened in repose,
> Can rule by supernatural right
> Yet be but sinew. . . .

All beautiful women may
Live in uncomposite blessedness,
And lead us to the like—if they
Will banish every thought, unless
The lineaments that please their view
When the long looking-glass is full,
Even from the foot-sole think it too.

(" Michael Robartes and the Dancer ".)

In the last resort the idea is related, too, to a simple affirmation of sensuous joy, of the refusal to accept a part of life as the whole :

Whatever stands in field or flood,
Bird, beast, fish or man,
Mare or stallion, cock or hen,
Stands in God's unchanging eye
In all the vigour of its blood :
In that faith I live or die, (" Tom the Lunatic".)

and even to representing the creation of the world as a sexual myth :

The stallion Eternity
Mounted the mare of Time,
'Gat the foal of the world. ("Tom at Cruachan".)

This brings us back, indeed, to the personalities in " The Tragic Generation." They, too, are shown in whole not in part. The structure of the " system " and the pressure of abstract thought upon them is so conceived that at no point do they lose their passionate individuality and separateness. It is in this sense that the characters can be described as sharing the life of mythological types, according to our definition of the poetic myth as that in which the passion of the individual and the abstraction of the idea cohere without loss to either. This, indeed, was for Yeats' poetry the peculiar advantage of the " system." Because the " system " was founded upon a theory of the whole man, it was essential for Yeats to take everything into consideration, and though he might raise the individual to the status of " hero " or absolute symbol he must not deprive him of humanity through the loss of the differentiating properties which make every man unique. (So, in the Christian myth, God becomes a carpenter.) Therefore we

are shown the sordid inadequacy as well as the imagined heroic stance of the personality. Dowson " . . . . was breaking his heart for the daughter of the keeper of an Italian eating house, in dissipation and drink . . . . he might that very night sleep upon a sixpenny bed in a doss-house." Johnson lives a life of pathetic brilliant fantasy and falls drunk to the floor of his library.

The achievement of " The Grey Rock " and " The Tragic Generation " must be kept in mind when we study " In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," from the 1919 collection *The Wild Swans at Coole*. This poem is Yeats' finest achievement in this particular genre, but it owes its greatness, which is of a complex kind, to the fact that it is the final form taken by the tendencies and developments which preceded it. Technically it is certainly a masterpiece, and evinces complete sureness of control and mature individuality of style. The hurrying, almost breathless movement of the first five stanzas, whose long and steady final lines seem like the release of a pent-up breath, as of a man running, act as a prelude to the meditative pause of the sixth stanza in which the major subject is announced. From this point the poem gains in intensity until the ninth stanza is finished. Strangely enough, the highest level reached in this work is the product of something more akin to the technique of music than that of poetry. Between the eighth and ninth stanzas there is a shifting of key, or, to take another analogy, the line

> And yet his mind outran the horses' feet

is like a load of coal thrown on to a furnace. Between the two stanzas the fire has blazed up, and the ninth stanza is intense and clear :

> We dreamed that a great painter had been born
> To cold Clare rock and Galway rock and thorn . . .

The heart of the furnace is burning itself out. This unique effect—though Wordsworth has something like it in " Resolution and Independence," a poem which is in many ways comparable with " In Memory of Major Robert Gregory "—occurs at least once elsewhere in Yeats : between the first and second stanzas of " Among School Children " there is a similar kind of shift :

the children's eyes
In momentary wonder stare upon
A sixty-year-old smiling public man.

I dream of a Ledaean body, bent
Above a sinking fire. . . .

It is not so much the sudden switching from one subject to another, helpful though this is, that is important, as the change from one kind of intensity to another " more clear as it is bright."

" In Memory of Major Robert Gregory " now develops a more elegiac movement. The repetitions, both rhythmic and verbal of the line

Soldier, scholar, horseman, he

are a bold device, which is completely successful in slowing down the pace to a more formal and melancholy strain. The twelfth and last stanza plays the part of a coda, in which the control of form that has pervaded the whole poem is emphasized. We are not required to accept as true the statement that Yeats had intended a longer poem. All is device and formality, a mask on the face of grief; we look through a clear stream and see bones lying on the bottom of the river. This kind of formalism can be compared with that in " Shepherd and Goatherd," the other long poem on Robert Gregory.[1] Here the Spenserian conventions, perhaps because they are associated too much in our minds with certain famous poems and a particular kind of mental " climate," merely block the way to understanding; the poem remains an exercise, an entry in a prize competition. " Shepherd and Goatherd " is perhaps the only thoroughly bad poem to be found in Yeats' post-1914 collections. It is shoddy literature, full of second-hand phrases like " some medicable herb," " the great war beyond the sea," and so on. The convention has swamped the perception. Yet " Shepherd and Goatherd " and the elegy on Robert Gregory are " about " the same event, and there are several fairly exact parallels:

[1] " a pastoral similar to what Spenser wrote of Sydney . . . a goatherd and a shepherd are talking in some vague place . . . in some remote period of the world. It is a new form for me and I think for modern poetry." Letter to Lady Gregory (1918), quoted by Hone, *Life*, p. 310.

> He that was best in every country sport
> And every country craft, and of us all
> Most courteous to slow age and hasty youth,
> Is dead

is merely a re-statement of

> When with the Galway foxhounds he would ride
> From Castle Taylor to the Roxborough side
> Or Esserkelly plain, few kept his pace . . .

The reasons for the success of the one poem and the failure of the other are to be attributed partly to the fact that in the elegy the apprehension of the personality reaches its highest point. Gregory has become the personal manifestation of yet another abstract idea : that of " Unity of Being," which he has achieved. This conception is one which Yeats had much in mind and a great deal of his poetry is concerned with the struggle between the various forces which hampered or controlled the movement towards this goal of the personality and of history. We have already seen how deeply it concerns the characters in *At the Hawk's Well.* The lunar phases of the " system " are but stages in the development away from or towards this goal. The accomplishments of Robert Gregory, therefore,—

> Soldier, scholar, horseman, he,
> And all he did done perfectly,
> As though he had but that one trade alone

—are celebrated not for their inherent worth, but because they are the attributes of " our Sidney and our perfect man," who is " as 'twere all life's epitome." Because Gregory has achieved Unity of Being he takes pride of place in the gallery of personality, and stands as the best example of the transforming power of the abstract idea on the poetic material, which, at the same time, loses nothing of its own precision and passion. We are reminded again of the lines from " The Statutes " :

> But passion could find character enough . . .
> And pressed at midnight in some public place
> Live lips upon a plummet-measured face.

Robert Gregory retains his human status—where Shelley's Adonais, for example, loses his—and his character retains its lively details, so that Yeats is free to speak, as he does, with loving detail of those places and scenes, which derive added power from the fact that they are associated not only with the subject of the elegy but with the poet's own experiences :

> For all things the delighted eye now sees
> Were loved by him ; the old storm-broken trees
> That cast their shadows upon road and bridge ;
> The tower set on the stream's edge ;
> The ford where drinking cattle make a stir
> Nightly, and startled by that sound
> The water-hen must change her ground ;
> He might have been your heartiest welcomer.

It is, as we have seen, by means of the poetic myth especially, that the abstract idea which the poet wishes to convey is translated into terms of personality in such a way that neither lose power. Indeed the power of myth lies in this pressure of the abstract thought onto the outward forms. The artistically successful myth is that in which we are aware of the " unknown power " without formulating it in intellectual terms, while the delighted imagination is entirely taken up with the outward forms. This, indeed, is the primary characteristic of the myths made by the most highly developed societies—Orpheus and Proserpine, Faust and Tristan have had a continuous appeal to the poetic imagination. Such myths are perpetually yielding new meanings—Rilke's treatment of the Orpheus legend in " Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes " is one example among many.[1]

Yeats' method in the elegy on Robert Gregory shares these characteristics of the mythological genre, although this particular poem bears less relation to Rilke's than, say, " Leda and

[1] Bowra (*The Heritage of Symbolism*, p. 70) says that the Eurydice myth in Rilke's hands becomes a myth " of his own thoughts about death." Rilke's poem is a fresh treatment of the myth, but whether Bowra is correct in assuming that the traditional classical interpretation of the story is as trivial as he makes out is doubtful. (" In this tragic story the Greeks symbolised how song may almost recall the dead but cannot make us see them face to face.") The journey of Orpheus to the Underworld in search of lost love should rather be grouped with the many myths about the experience and nature of death, which was precisely why it proved so attractive to Rilke.

the Swan", because the elegy is not related to any specific myth ; it does not unfold a legendary story of plot and counter-plot, but is, so to speak, a choice of one element only in a legend, a description of the hero's character, as though instead of the story of Hercules and the Golden Apples, we had only a description of a man of fabulous strength called Hercules. This description is, however, carefully arranged within a formal pattern so that the effect of balanced intensity, whereby Robert Gregory is made the epitome of all that has gone before, is maintained. Gregory is " whirling upon a compass point," like the poets and artists of " Coole Park, 1929 " (*The Winding Stair*) and the " lost companions " are in formation round him. Three contemporaries, Lionel Johnson, Synge, and George Pollexfen, are used to reinforce in terms of other personalities the idea that Robert Gregory has achieved Unity of Being, for each of the three belongs to a phase lacking perfection and forms a contrast with " our Sidney and our perfect man." Johnson suffers under the burden of intellect, his life is thought only ; Synge must endure the dissatisfaction of the artist in a divided world of which Yeats was intensely aware, and of which he saw a particular example in Synge. The passage in " The Tragic Generation " is relevant : " No mind can engender till divided into two, but that of Keats or a Shelley falls into an intellectual part that follows and a hidden emotional flying image, whereas in a mind like that of Synge the emotional part is dreaded and stagnant, while the intellectual part is a clear mirror-like technical achievement." Pollexfen, the " hard-riding country gentleman " who took to astrology in old age, is another example of this dichotomy.

The difficulty of achievement in a divided world is a secondary element which has great importance in the scheme of this poem, and Yeats does not attempt to evade the issue by supposing that the " perfect man " remains unaffected by it. Gregory and his work are consumed by their own intensity, and it is in this sense that they destroy themselves, their universe perishing with them :

> Some burn damp faggots, others may consume
> The entire combustible world in one small room
> As though dried straw, and if we turn about
> The bare chimney is gone black out
> Because the work had finished in that flare.

"Violent energy," wrote Yeats in "The Tragic Generation," "which is like a fire of straw, consumes in a few minutes the nervous vitality, and is useless in the arts." The idea that all historical creation exhausts itself in the moment of becoming, that the creator is consumed through the creation, is another important feature of Yeats' mental landscape. It appears in the song from the play *The Resurrection* (1931):

> Everything that man esteems
> Endures a moment or a day:
> Love's pleasure drives his love away,
> The painter's brush consumes his dreams;
> The herald's cry, the soldier's tread
> Exhaust his glory and his might:
> Whatever flames upon the night
> Man's own resinous heart has fed.

Yeats saw this problem as one particularly affecting the work of the artist in contemporary society, and he asked in "The Tragic Generation," in a passage which is really a preliminary study for the lines from *The Resurrection*:

> Why are these strange souls born everywhere today? with hearts that Christianity, as shaped by history, cannot satisfy. Our love letters wear out our love; no school of painters outlives its founders, every stroke of the brush exhausts the impulse, pre-Raphaelitism had some twenty years; impressionism thirty perhaps. Why should we believe that religion can never bring round its antithesis? Is it true that our air is disturbed, as Mallarmé said, by "the trembling of the veil of the temple," or that our whole age is "seeking to bring forth a sacred book?"
>
> (p. 388.)

If we follow the chain of these references a little further we find that this idea is closely related to a central problem of belief and so leads us round again to the concept of Unity of Being and back to the archetypal figure of Robert Gregory. In *The Resurrection*, a Hebrew, a Syrian and a Greek argue about the historical implications of the Passion, and their argument serves as a vehicle for the expression of Yeats' view that Christianity broke up a historical pattern of order and knowledge within

whose framework men had been able to achieve Unity of Being :

> Odour of blood when Christ was slain
> Made all Platonic tolerance vain
> And vain all Doric discipline.

Unlike Nietzsche, Yeats saw Christianity as the triumph of Dionysus :

> The Syrian : What is human knowledge ?
>
> The Greek : The knowledge that keeps the road from here to Persia free from robbers, that has built the beautiful humane cities, that has made the modern world, that stands between us and the barbarian.
>
> The Syrian : But what if there is something it cannot explain, something more important than anything else ?
>
> The Greek : You talk as if you wanted the barbarian back.
>
> The Syrian : What if there is something that lies outside knowledge, outside order. What if at the moment when knowledge and order seem complete that something appears ?

Yeats came to believe that from time to time just such a breaking-up of a pre-formed pattern occurred in history—an " hour of terror," as he describes it in " Meru " (*A Full Moon in March*) and in " The Gyres " (*Last Poems*). This belief is probably of greater significance for his work than his desire for an aristocratic order of society on which so much emphasis has been laid. The modern age was such an hour, disturbed by the trembling of the veil of the temple. Politically speaking, Yeats knew that this belief was incompatible with democracy. More than anything else—far more than his personal liking for " tall unpopular men " and for the grace that sometimes goes with oligarchies—this explains not only why he was decidedly not a democrat but why he has been described as a Fascist. (Yeats' "Fascism", when put to the test, is found to be nothing more than a certain measure of historical awareness, which he shared with other writers, such as D. H. Lawrence and Wyndham Lewis, who later developed distinctively Fascist beliefs). It is this historical awareness

rather than any prophetic consciousness of world war that is expressed in the celebrated poem " The Second Coming."[1]

It is important for the full understanding of the elegy on Robert Gregory to remember that in Yeats' view the historical order was in process of disintegration. Robert Gregory's achievement of Unity of Being is then seen in its full perspective, and his work, like the work of the poem, as the hard-won triumph of order over inherent chaos and the dichotomy prevalent among the tragic generation—a balance upon the whirling compass-point. But, as we have seen, the intensity of mind required for this task is so great that the work vanishes in the flare. This is one reason why the poem ends, as it does, so suddenly : the furnace has burnt itself out. It is enough to summarize the achievement of this great and complex work of art by saying that in it two abstract ideas, both fundamental to Yeats' view of history and of personality, co-operate to make the subject of the elegy a symbol of themselves—but a symbol which is mythological in the sense that Gregory remains the flesh-and-blood hero of the abstract forces. " In Memory of Major Robert Gregory " is the high-water mark of this particular genre, a prodigious flower whose roots are in that early discovery of personality.

But further developments of both method and style were to follow.

II

With " Easter, 1916," a new kind of material is apparent, and from this poem onwards can be traced a weakening in the sense of personality. The balance, in which the contemporary figures retain their integral individuality while acting as the heroes of the mythological system created anew for each work,

[1] I have not seen it pointed out anywhere else that the image of the beast in the desert which has such a terrifying effect in this poem was one that must have haunted Yeats for many years. It had its origin in 1887 in spiritualistic experiences with Mathers in the latter's house at Forest Hill. The story is told in the *Autobiographies*, p. 230 : " He (Mathers) gave me a cardboard symbol and I closed my eyes. Sight came slowly . . . but there rose before me mental images that I could not control . . . a desert and black Titan raising himself up by his two hands from the middle of a heap of ancient ruins."

is upset. What remains with us after a reading of "Easter, 1916," is not the personality, even the collective personality of

> MacDonagh and MacBride
> And Connolly and Pearse,

but the image of the stone in the river:

> Hearts with one purpose alone
> Through summer and winter seem
> Enchanted to a stone
> To trouble the living stream.

The subject-matter of this poem is not immediately apparent. The poem is not really about the men of the Easter Rising, despite the fanfare of names at the end. It is a poem about the modifications which the Rising produced in Yeats' picture of Ireland and, by implication, in the world of action and propaganda in which he had engaged. That clear satirical mirror, which had reflected the epigrams, the defiant speeches from the Abbey stage, and which had caught in its mocking light figures as distant as the London Irish and the Rhymers' Club, was suddenly flawed. "Easter, 1916," is both a registering of this shock and an attempt at readjustment which largely comes to nothing, because Yeats quickly substitutes for the weakness of the Moderates' argument the less assailable belief that in some way which is not clearly specified the struggle has been worth the sacrifice. Later he expanded this into:

> Some had no thought of victory
> But had gone out to die
> That Ireland's mind be greater,
> Her heart mount up on high.
>
> ("Three songs to the one Burden". *Last Poems*.)

But martyrs whose sacrifice is of this kind shed personality and lose humanity from the moment when the executioner puts his torch to the faggots, or the officer gives the word to fire. Only the saint can carry his human personality as a living thing in men's memories through this cancelling act; the highest intelligence and finest sensibility alone can keep the human lineaments recognizable in the fierce light of religious or ideological passion that beats upon a Golgotha. And neither Connolly nor Pearse were saints, much less MacBride, the

" drunken, vainglorious lout." Thus it is that Yeats fashions out of the men of the Easter Rising figures whose static gestures are those of a martyrology in woodcut. This development is accentuated in the two poems that follow—" Sixteen Dead Men " and " The Rose Tree," both of which are merely splendid statements of the commonplace that no logic is proof against the fact of martyrdom, a commonplace to which the eyes of Government alone are blind :

> You say that we should still the land
> Till Germany's overcome ;
> But who is there to argue that
> Now Pearse is deaf and dumb ?
> And is there logic to outweigh
> MacDonagh's bony thumb ?

" Easter, 1916," marks the beginning of the martyrology, as distinct from the mythology in the treatment of personae. It also provides us with an example of the use now being made by Yeats of the symbolist technique in its image of the stone in the living stream. The image and its abstraction :

> Too long a sacrifice
> Can make a stone of the heart.
> O when may it suffice ?

embody of course one of Yeats' favourite ideas, whose truth he had tested by bitter experience of his own. He had seen

> A Helen of social welfare dream
> Climb on a wagonette to scream,

and his thought continued to run counter to the fashion ; his theory of the Unity of Being also, and his belief or complex of beliefs about the undivided personality helped it to convince him that a beautiful woman but betrayed her " supernatural rights " by engaging in politics :

> Have I not seen the loveliest women born
> Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn,
> Because of her opinionated mind
> Barter that horn and every good
> By quiet natures understood
> For an old bellows full of angry wind ?

(" A Prayer for my Daughter ".)

And it was this idea, although it was later to be subject to modification, that inspired the powerful ideological pressure behind the symbols not only of the stone in the stream in "Easter, 1916," but of that even more miraculous symbol of the seagull in "On a Political Prisoner," the last of the Easter Rising series. There is here no question of a mythological system, and it is well not to speak indifferently, as several critics have done, of "mythological symbolism" in this connexion. The symbolist technique has several affinities with the mythological—there is the same pressure of abstract idea, the same integrity of outward form. But here it is not the living personality that is enhanced, but the symbol itself. The symbol, be it the moorhens at Thoor Ballylee, or a seagull, or a bird of figured metal, brings with it an aura of suggestions and associations, which spread out in ever widening circles, whereas the mythological personality, like Robert Gregory's, tends to drop back into itself, to fill out its own casing and produce a richer and more complex, though less diffuse, experience. In "On a Political Prisoner" it seems as though the poet is performing on an instrument whose notes pass almost beyond the range of human hearing:

> When long ago I saw her ride
> Under Ben Bulben to the meet,
> The beauty of her countryside
> With all youth's lonely wildness stirred,
> She seemed to have grown clean and sweet
> As any rock-bred, sea-borne bird.
>
> Sea-borne, or balanced on the air
> When first it sprang out of the nest
> Upon some lofty rock to stare
> Upon the cloudy canopy,
> While under its storm-beaten breast
> Cried out the hollows of the sea.

We can, if need be, trace the idea behind these two stanzas, the equation of the proud and lonely Eva Gore-Booth with a bird of the sea, the implication that in that affinity lay the naturalness, the integrity, the undivided being that alone was admirable, and which has been exchanged for a "bitter, an abstract thing." But this is hardly the root of the matter. Beyond

any possible intellectual analysis of the final stanza stretches a whole world of fresh experience. This experience takes us away from the political prisoner, who has become little but an object extruded and pushed away as the poem takes its upward leap.

The direction of such of the later poems as are ostensibly written round the old friends or the new martyrs is away from personality, just as the direction of the earlier poems and prose writings which culminate in the elegy on Robert Gregory was towards a fuller realization of personality within the poetic and ideological framework. In a sense it is true to say that the poet substituted his own personality for the manifold array of other men's. There is almost nothing in *The Tower*, written when Yeats' genius was at high tide, which falls within the limits set for this chapter. " All Souls' Night," the last poem in the collection, although it portrays at some length three of Yeats' contemporaries, emphasizes more strongly the drive away from personality. For Edward Horton, Florence Emery, MacGregor Mathers are, in the end, dismissed :

> But names are nothing. What matter who it be,
> So that his elements have grown so fine
> The fume of muscatel
> Can give his sharpened palate ecstasy.

Yeats, instead, has attained to thought, a thought that is more than formula or process, and takes the place of life itself :

> Such thought, that in it bound
> I need no other thing,
> Wound in mind's wanderings
> As mummies in a mummy-cloth are wound.

Yeats reserved these words for a particular kind of experience, but they indicate the direction of his mind and poetry :

> It seems that I must bid the Muse go pack,
> Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend
> Until imagination, ear and eye,
> Can be content with argument and deal
> In abstract things.
>
> (" The Tower ", I)

In the last poems Yeats returned to his martyrology in a series of poems and songs about Ireland. " Parnell's Funeral " from *A Full Moon in March* is almost the only one that has any elaboration of thought or design, and in this poem Parnell, the crucified leader, is made to have part in an older mythology. The thought behind this conjunction is that Parnell was the sacrificial victim of his own people, the " frenzied crowd " :

> What is this sacrifice ? Can someone there
> Recall the Cretan barb that pierced a star ?

If we may judge by his work, Yeats' mind had changed greatly in the space of a few years. That rich sense of the personal which he experienced from his contacts with other men and which he wrought into such poems as " In Memory of Major Robert Gregory " or " Coole Park, 1929 " has largely disappeared from his verse. His doctrine on hatred is an example of this tendency. In " A Prayer for my Daughter " (June, 1919) he had written of arrogance and hatred as " peddled in the thoroughfares," the enemies of " innocence and beauty," on which, both in this poem and in the poem " In Memory of Eva Gore Booth " (*The Winding Stair;* 1933), he had placed a supreme value. Now, in " Ribh Considers Christian Love Insufficient " (*A Full Moon in March*), he writes :

> I study hatred with great diligence,
> For that's a passion in my own control,
> A sort of besom that can clear the soul
> Of everything that is not mind or sense,

and in *Last Poems* joins with " Mitchel's prayer " to " Send war in our time, O Lord.' This attitude is also much in evidence in the *Letters on Poetry*. The poems on the Irish martyrs are produced by this mood of bitterness and violence. There is nothing elsewhere in Yeats' work quite like that immensely stirring song " The Ghost of Roger Casement." But the issue, we know, is a dead one. " The Ghost of Roger Casement " and the other poems which are grouped with it are period pieces. Their vigour and violence is all part of an exercise in violence and vigour ; it is drained of the intensely personal emotion that lies behind " Easter, 1916 " and " The Rose Tree." But for the determining circumstances, Yeats

might as well have written about Messer Bruno or the Gracchi. Either theme could have been treated with the gusto that he wanted to cultivate, had his tastes and tradition lain in their direction. It is in this sense, too, that Casement, Pearse and the rest are no longer personalities : we have to make a mental effort to recall that Yeats had actually met and talked with Padraic Pearse, so formal and gesticulatory has this remote martyr become. Yeats also felt that he was witnessing the breakdown of the historical order, about which he had written in " The Tragic Generation " and " The Second Coming", evolving towards a final stage, and this feeling helped to diminish the importance of the personality and of the mythological method that had made poetry out of the lives and gestures of others :

> Things thought too long can be no longer thought,
> For beauty dies of beauty, worth of worth,
> And ancient lineaments are blotted out. (" The Gyres ".)

Yet to quote these lines, as Daiches[1] does, and to suppose that the matter rests there is to forget that a divided mind lies at the heart of this poetry. The figures that Yeats shows us in the last poems are only those which had been inscribed on the back of the mirror all the time ; old age and great fame generated an irresponsible Puck that induced Yeats to display the reverse of that majestic glass in which the pomp and circumstance of *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* had been reflected. As Bowra says : " He was now free from all obligations and could be frankly and enjoyably himself. The old age which he had dreaded brought an enhanced vitality and freedom. . . . He had at last put into his poetry the qualities which had for long been prominent in his conversation[2]. Yet the divided mind prevailed and the last poems reveal little of consistency in their thought. In " The Municipal Gallery Revisited " the poet returns to the figures of the mythological genre, and the sense of personality is as strong as it was before ; it results indeed in an affirmation that the person is both the end and the beginning of the individual experience and of history :

[1] *Poetry and the Modern World*, pp. 188–9.

[2] *The Heritage of Symbolism*, p. 216.

You that would judge me, do not judge alone
This book or that, come to this hallowed place
Where my friends' portraits hang and look thereon ;
Ireland's history in their lineaments trace ;
Think where man's glory most begins and ends,
And say my glory was I had such friends.

If the men of the Easter Rising are shown as martyrs, then John Synge and Lady Gregory are the saints of a new personal dispensation ; the municipal gallery has become a " hallowed place," a temple, and their portraits are the holy icons within it. The mythologizing imagination, doing its work through the transformation of the personality, is still active. Yeats even remembers and returns to the ancestors to whom he had addressed the dedication " Pardon, old fathers," the poem which had first made manifest the discovery of the personality :

My name is Henry Middleton,
I have a small demesne,
A small forgotten house that's set
On a storm-bitten green.

The contrast between this kind of poem and the brittle, Skeltonic Irish songs makes it plain that we must take Yeats' word for it that after fifty years he was still seeking a theme. And there is yet another and more obvious conflict in the last poems and plays between the determinist philosophy by which Yeats, especially in his last years, was obsessed (and which finds tragic expression in the last play, *Purgatory*), and the experience of joy which is related in "The Gyres" and "The Man and the Echo" :

Out of cavern comes a voice
And all it knows is that one word ' Rejoice ! '

This conflict can be placed in its proper perspective if we consider next those parts of the work in which Yeats makes a mythology out of himself and the attributes which surround him.

CHAPTER III

Attis' Image

Great things are done when Men and Mountains meet ;
This is not done by Jostling in the Street.

Blake.

I

Yeats is not a poetic introvert in the same sense that Shelley or Baudelaire or Mr. Eliot are poetic introverts. When they look inward, these poets discover within themselves a space where all is hollowness, weakness and confusion. Shelley's footsteps tremble on the edge of death ; Baudelaire labours much to describe that hollow space where the " pauvre ange " sings

Que rien ici-bas n'est certain,
Et que toujours, avec quelque soin qu'il se farde,
Se trahit l'égoïsme humain ;

or the Gulf where " action, désir, rêve " become vain :

J'ai peur du sommeil comme on a peur d'un grand trou,
Tout plein de vague horreur, menant on ne sait où ;
Je ne vois qu'infini par toutes les fenêtres.

Yeats, when he looks within, is conscious of power, a power that grew and matured with years. He may deplore weakness of body, but rejoices in the strength of mind and imagination, experiencing not " le vent de la Peur," but the excited fantastical imagination labouring to create its Byzantium where the dead poet becomes an image of gold. This strength itself becomes a frenzy, the divine fury of inspiration :

A mind Michael Angelo knew
That can pierce the clouds,
Or inspired by frenzy
Shake the dead in their shrouds. ("An Acre of Grass".)

While many other poets have built on weakness and confusion, this consciousness of power is the foundation on which many of Yeats' most splendid and most personal lyrics are constructed. To affirm this is not to deny that many of the later poems are inspired by regret for past follies or by Yeats' melancholy idea of himself as the last romantic:

> But all is changed, that high horse riderless,
> Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode
> Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood.
> (" Coole and Ballylee".)

The mood finds at once its epitome and its answer in the little poem entitled " The New Faces " in *The Tower*, where knowledge of power and achievement leads to a denial of the great negatives:

> If you, that have grown old, were the first dead,
> Neither catalpa tree nor scented lime
> Should hear my living feet, nor would I tread
> Where we wrought that shall break the teeth of Time.
> Let the new faces play what tricks they will
> In the old rooms; night can outbalance day,
> Our shadows rove the garden gravel still,
> The living seem more shadowy than they.

With the twentieth century a quarter gone, it was a considerable achievement—and one that sets Yeats apart from his contemporaries—to have reached again the mood of " Not marble nor the gilded monuments of princes," and to have done this without causing us to feel that we are being given pastiche instead of poetry. It is true that this very success forces upon Yeats the dismal role of the exception that proves the rule. Baudelaire's " grand trou " is the subject of half the literature of modern Europe, the nameless fear that suddenly opens in the heart of civilized man, the " cauchemar multiforme " that oppresses the minds and casts a stillness over the landscapes of Chekov and Dostoievsky, of Thomas Mann and T. S. Eliot alike.

This sense of power in Yeats, his apparent mastery of his age, his ability to reject absolutely that in the age which is not to his liking, is to be attributed very largely to the " system." From the impact of the system on his poetry arose that set of symbols, almost of trappings, with which Yeats surrounds his poetic self, and from the system, with its curious mixture of

allegory and spiritualism, of philosophy and necromancy, came the mythology of self. Few poets have gone quite so far in this direction as Yeats, and few have presented to the world poetic personalities worked on with such a degree of elaboration, rejection and selection. Other modern poets appear fragmentary beside him—the portraits of Baudelaire, Eliot, Rilke emerge from their work, where they do emerge, as a series of confused and shifting planes, a Picasso-like jumble of eyes and profiles, of light and inexplicable shadow. What Yeats loses in subtlety and sensitivity he gains in brilliance and clarity. His language in the later poems reflects the gain.

By writing *A Vision*, Yeats fulfilled at least two important functions and satisfied two important needs. By bestowing upon Yeats a sacred book *A Vision* gave to his conception of history and of personality, or of history-through-personality, a pattern and an order which he had long been seeking to impose upon it. It gave also that sense of power which has already been discussed. "I put *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* into evidence to show that my poetry has gained in self-possession and power. I owe this change to an incredible experience."[1] Secondly, *A Vision* gave the poet "metaphors for his poetry" (in the words of the "instructors" themselves). "Metaphors" here means much more than a set of verbal ornaments; the meaning of these metaphors, which resides in a body of rhapsodical fragments, amended philosophies, chips and shavings from the subterranean images of spiritualism, is sunk below the surface. Although it has no intrinsic value, this hotch-potch is, incongruously enough, of first importance for the study of Yeats' work. From such material, Yeats, alone of modern poets, constructed some of his finest works—poems like "Sailing to Byzantium" and "All Souls' Night," plays like *The Resurrection* and *The Words upon the Window Pane*. This interaction and its poetic results is our present object of study.

The first question to ask is whether Yeats believed the doctrines of *A Vision*. Most critics have put the query and have returned to it a qualified and unsatisfying negative. It is perhaps the form of the question that is wrong. There is no mistaking the seriousness of "All Souls' Night" or the power which that seriousness bestows:

[1] *A Vision* (1937), p. 8. All references are to this edition.

Such thought—such thought have I that hold it tight
Till meditation master all its parts,
Nothing can stay my glance
Until that glance run in the world's despite
To where the damned have howled away their hearts,
And where the blessed dance . . .

These last two lines are another reference to Dante. Christian doctrine had in its own time bestowed order on all parts of the universe, even on " questo basso Inferno," of which order Hell itself indeed was but an aspect, and it is by virtue of the existence of that order—rather than because the order was a Christian order—that Dante became a great poet. Will not the imposed order of *A Vision* fulfil the same function for another poet, at a time when Christianity is ailing or dead? With part of his mind, I think, Yeats believed in this possibility, and it is in this sense perhaps more than in any other, that he believed in the system, believed in it for its function rather than for itself.

" Some will ask me," he writes in the last paragraph of the 1928 Introduction, " whether I believe in the actual existence of my circuits of the sun and moon. . . . To such a question I can but answer that if sometimes, overwhelmed by miracle as all men must be when in the midst of it, I have taken such periods literally, my reason has soon recovered; and now that the system stands out clearly in my imagination I regard them as stylistic arrangements of experience comparable to the cubes in the drawings of Wyndham Lewis and to the ovoids in the sculpture of Brancusi. They have helped me to hold in a single thought reality and justice." It is as well that in this way Yeats supplies an excuse for the ordinary reader, for the disconcerting thing about *A Vision* is its deterministic and diagrammatic basis, which to most minds entirely fails to explain how the historical movements of which it is supposed to be the cause could have arisen. Apart from this defect, Yeats' discussion of Rome and Byzantium, of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, has as much or as little validity as any other philosophy of history.

Finally, it was as a form of secret knowledge, a satisfaction of the age-long hunger for the sacred book, that Yeats described the experience of *A Vision* in the long poem " The Gift of Harun-al-Raschid " (1923), which is a fantastical account of Yeats' and Mrs. Yeats' relations with the unknown instructors :

A live-long hour
She seemed the learned man and I the child;
Truths without father came, truths that no book
Of all the uncounted books that I have read,
Nor thought out of her mind or mine begot,
Self-born, high-born, and solitary truths,
Those terrible implacable straight lines
Drawn through the wandering vegetative dream,
Even those truths that when my bones are dust
Must drive the Arabian host.

The possession of a secret knowledge "that is to age what milk is to a child" helped to satisfy something in Yeats which had been with him since his youth and which had directed his reading and led him to Blake, Shelley and Spenser. These, more than any other English poets, had felt the same impulse and the same need. This is not to deny that the mere need for a system such as this will permit all sorts of extraordinary aberrations to rush into the vacuum left by a lost religious faith or moral order. *A Vision* is not the least extraordinary of these.[1]

For the subject of this chapter the most important aspect of the philosophy of *A Vision* is the concept of the anti-self, an idea which is first introduced in the essay called *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917) and the poem "Ego Dominus Tuus" (first printed as a prologue to the essay and reprinted in *The Wild Swans at Coole*). *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* is a kind of prologemenon to the sacred book. Men, though bound by a deterministic world cycle, always seek their opposites; the creative artist *qua* artist is amongst those who find it easier to break away from the chain of determinism because of this search. "Ego Dominus Tuus" takes the form of a dialogue round this theme:

Ille. By the help of an image
I call to my own opposite, summon all
That I have handled least, least looked upon.

Hic. And I would find myself and not an image.

[1] The alternative to religion is superstition. Christianity has never been absolved from the stigma set upon it in the mind of traditional Romanism, whose dying moral order it replaced with what seemed a decadent fanaticism. Yeats saw Christianity as the substitution of miracle for reason. (See *A Vision*, p. 273 sqq., *The Resurrection* and many of the poems). He makes Christ's main impulse one of pity.

It is worth noting that the make-up of *A Vision* bamboozled at least one critic whom we find solemnly discussing whether the *Speculum* was a genuine book.

Ille. That is our modern hope and by its light
We have lit upon the gentle, sensitive mind
And lost the old nonchalance of the hand ;
Whether we have chosen chisel, pen or brush,
We are but critics, or but half create,
Timid, entangled, empty and abashed,
Lacking the countenance of our friends.

This is Yeats' description of the modern creative artist. " Ille " goes on to claim that Dante in search of his anti-self, lecherous in life, found in the purity of Beatrice an image which not only unlocked the springs of his poetry but set upon the universe the seal of order—the " unpersuadable justice."[1] In the essay Yeats makes further examples out of Lady Gregory, Synge, Morris and others :

> When I think of any great poetical writer of the past . . . I comprehend, if I know the lineaments of his life, that the work is the man's flight from his entire horoscope, his blind struggle in the network of stars." . . .
> If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are, and try to assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves, though we may accept one from others. Active virtue, as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a code is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask . . . Wordsworth, great poet though he be, is so often flat and heavy partly because his moral sense, being a discipline he had not created, a mere obedience, has no theatrical element.

Yeats' use of the word " mask " in this passage approaches close to the more abstruse technical meaning which the word bears in *A Vision*, where " mask " is one of the four faculties and represents the object of the will. At the end of the first section of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* Yeats returns to the case of Wordsworth in a passage which is a foreshadowing of one of the last poems (entitled " What Then ? "), written, Hone tells us, for a school magazine—a poem whose deceptive simplicity might conceal how long-standing and important are the impulse and knowledge behind it.

The concept of the anti-self is worked out in greater detail

[1] If we omit the emphasis on Dante's alleged lecherousness, Charles Williams in his recent study of Dante, *The Figure of Beatrice*, reaches much the same general conclusion. Here we see, to adopt Yeatsian metaphor, Dante led through Hell in search of his anti-self, amongst images of every kind of sin, until he eventually finds the image of absolute sinlessness, which reveals to him " All that he seeks," the central point of the universal Order.

in the central portion of *A Vision* (Book I, Part III: "The Twenty-Eight Incarnations"), which is indeed little but an expansion, couched in the technical language of the instructors, of the theme of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*. Here the whole scheme is a scheme of conflict, of men seeking their opposites: all men of the first fourteen phases have a "mask" (i.e., an object of will) from among Phases sixteen to twenty-seven, and vice-versa. Thus Landor (Phase seventeen), a violent and tempestuous man in his life, has his mask in Phase three, where simplicity and innocence are combined—the violent man cultivates a serene, classical art. The history of personality and of nations is a struggle between the primary, or objective aspect and the antithetical, or subjective. This doctrine of the anti-self is the whole meaning of Yeats' celebrated saying that "We make out of the quarrel . . . . with ourselves poetry."

The concept is simple; its implications less so. In the introduction to *The Resurrection*, a tantalizingly brief and elusive summary of his mental history, Yeats supplies a clue. "For years," he writes, "I have been preoccupied with a certain myth that was itself a reply to a myth. I do not mean a fiction, but one of those statements our nature is compelled to make and employ as a truth though there cannot be sufficient evidence. When I was a boy everybody talked about progress, and rebellion against my elders took the form of aversion to that myth."[1] Yeats goes on to show in detail—we must not take his words too literally or without allowing for the excessive simplification with which he treats a long and deeply-felt experience—how he answered the myth of progress with *The Wanderings of Oisin*, where the rise and fall of human life is symbolized—though here he guards himself again by declaring "I did not pick these images because of any theory, but because I found them impressive, yet all the while abstractions haunted me." Further developments are described, and Yeats is seen to be regarding—for the purpose of this introductory essay at least—his whole work as the creation of a myth to answer the myth of progress. Finally, "after some years came the thought that a man always tried to become his opposite, to become what he would abhor if he did not desire it. . . . Then unexpectedly and under circumstances

[1] *Wheels and Butterflies* (1934), p. 101. Further discussion of these points will be found in the next chapter.

described in *A Packet to Ezra Pound* came a symbolical system displaying the conflict in all its forms." The symbolical system is of course *A Vision*. The cycle of the Platonic year is explained, the doctrine of re-incarnation, and the re-birth of the soul—in fact ideas of the sacred book are briefly summarised and supported, as in that book, by the evidences of spiritualism —" the heart of a phantom is beating."

Yeats, then, saw the work of *A Vision* as the creation of a myth. The figures of men and women, who are taken as representative of the twenty-eight incarnations, are turned into what are really mythological types embodying the abstract ideas which had long pursued the poet. Each figure is simplified, straitened on the Procrustean bed of the four faculties, set in its place on a handful of evidence. Macneice speaks of his " cartoon world drawn in a few hard, black lines." *A Vision* is however rather different from the mythological world of the *Autobiographies*. Its rigid classifications are the result of an attempt to come to terms with philosophy and religion and to eliminate the scientific *Weltanschauung* at a blow. This could only be done by turning all opposing forces—in particular, as in the introduction to *The Resurrection*, Marxism and Roman Catholicism—into myths, too, and proposing the system as a counter-myth. Theology or political thought cannot be made to fight the myth except in so far as they share the characteristics of myth, nor can myth struggle against them unless it transform itself into scientific thought, which is impossible. It is because there is no common ground between them that, for example, Christian mythology has both failed to overcome or be overcome by scientific modernism; neither side is prepared to accept the other's rules and the match is indefinitely postponed. That Yeats did not succeed in turning scientific or political thought into a myth hardly needs saying—although he found himself supported by Catholic writers like Dawson in his view of the myth of progress—nor did he ever make a sustained and serious attempt. The important thing is that the mythology of *A Vision* gave him what he desired—a sense of power, a sense of order, the revelation of a secret knowledge and metaphors for his poetry. These four things as they have place in his verse and are interwoven with other elements must now be examined.

II

"The Phases of the Moon," "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," with which must be included "Ego Dominus Tuus," all from the collection *The Wild Swans at Coole*, were written, as Yeats explains in a note in *Collected Poems*, as "a text for exposition." They represent the first stage in which the mythology of *A Vision* remains unassimilated as poetic material, and they need to be read with a translation if they are to be understood. *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* is the key to "Ego Dominus Tuus": the dominus is Dante's "Lord of Terrible Aspect," which Yeats interprets as a vision of the anti-self, "that which must come from above and beyond me."[1] "The Phases of the Moon" were first printed as a prologue to the central section of *A Vision* and the poem is really a summary of the doctrine contained therein. But in form it already represents that curious mingling of mythological strata which soon becomes a dominant feature of the later poetry. The poem takes the form of a dialogue between Owen Aherne and Michael Robartes, two fictional characters about whom Yeats at a much earlier period and long before the system appeared had already written some short stories. Yeats simply revives them, slightly changes their attributes, and makes them, both in this poem and in the weird "Stories of Michael Robartes and his Friends: an Extract from a Record made by his Pupils" (*A Vision*, p. 31 sqq.), take a place in the new mythological system. The function which these characters perform in the stories in *A Vision* is that of explaining in the form of fiction how knowledge of the system came into Yeats' hands. (This, of course, was before he decided to include in the 1937 edition of *A Vision* "A Packet for Ezra Pound", in which he reveals the fact of his wife's mediumship). Robartes retails in passages which are full of Yeats' special kind of humour how he discovered an old book, the *Speculum Angelorum et Hominum* of "Giraldus" propping up the bed in his mistress' sordid garret in Vienna. The pages of these stories are thickly crowded with mysterious Arabs, forgotten manuscripts, lovers who read *Axel* in bed, two

[1] *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, p. 11.

characters named John Bond and Mary Bell whose names, at least, seem to be borrowed from Blake, delightful ebullitions of fancy like the philosopher who devotes his life to teaching the cuckoo how to build a nest. Yeats introduces his portentous philosophical system with the engaging facility of a Rider Haggard, whose adventures always begin with the discovery of some mysterious stone or forgotten papyrus. The device helps Yeats to satisfy his craving for the esoteric and it shows the kind of approach which he had towards the most serious forms of thought. The thought must be his own creation, his own personal adventure ; it must be surrounded with all the trappings of Ahasuerus, the midnight candle, the lonely tower and the prestige of secret knowledge :

> . . . the light proves that he is reading still.
> He has found, after the manner of his kind,
> Mere images ; chosen this place to live in
> Because, it may be, of the candle-light
> From the far tower where Milton's Platonist
> Sat late, or Shelley's visionary prince :
> The lonely light that Samuel Palmer engraved,
> An image of mysterious wisdom won by toil.

This kind of setting, this deliberate stylization of himself as the mythological learned man, recurs again and again in the later poetry.

If " The Phases of the Moon " is an unmalleable exposition of the new mythology, " The Double Vision of Michael Robartes " is a rather more personalized treatment of similar material, written, Yeats tells us in " the excitement of discovery." The first section of the poem establishes the determinism of the system, a determinism which Yeats probably delighted in all the more because it ran counter to Christian belief :

> When had I my own will ?
> O not since life began.

In the second section the Sphinx represents the outward-looking mind, the Buddha the introspective. The dancing girl is an embodiment of the Fifteenth Phase, the phase of perfection, where is no human life—the consummation of the whole phasal process.

O little did they care who danced between
And little she by whom her dance was seen
So she had outdanced thought.
Body perfection brought,

For what but eye and ear silence the mind
With the minute particulars of mankind?
Mind moved yet seemed to stop
As 'twere a spinning-top.

In contemplation had those three so wrought
Upon a moment and so stretched it out
That they, time overthrown,
Were dead, yet flesh and bone.

These three stanzas are a poetic restatement of the passages on the Fifteenth Phase in *A Vision* (pp. 135-7). If the prose and verse are read side by side we see at once how the translation into poetry has affected the material. What was confused and awkward in the prose has become alive in the poetry. It is not only the disappearance of the technical terms which helps to create this effect. Yeats insists on the *solidity* of the vision: the abstract is translated into terms of image and metaphor, a mythology is created. *A Vision* would have been ineffective as material for poetry unless it had lent itself to this kind of pictorialization. The philosophy of the academies was largely useless to Yeats because he found it so difficult to convey its abstractions into the sort of poetry he wanted to write. (He did not want to write the kind of poetry Wordsworth wrote in *The Excursion*). Much as Blake had done before him, Yeats solved at one blow the problem of "philosophical poetry" by composing, with a little assistance from Plato, Empedocles and the rest, his own philosophy. Because the mind that created the philosophy was the same as the mind that created the poetry, a poet's mind, the old mutual incompatibility does not arise, and we are not faced with the dismal spectacle of a poet struggling to translate into verse concepts which are essentially foreign to his way of understanding. This method carries with it an inevitable disadvantage in that the philosophical background will, in all probability, remain a private esotericism, which often drags the poems down with it into its own obscurity. Yeats doubtless realized that even *A Vision* would not, unadulterated,

make a poem, and he ceased to write any further " texts for exposition." Indeed, it was *A Vision* that was to act as the handmaid of the poetry rather than the reverse, and it soon comes to share this function with other manifestations of the mythological search.

" Solomon and the Witch " (from *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*) is an example of a less literal treatment of themes from the sacred book, but the poem cannot readily be understood without reference to the idea of the Fifteenth Phase. The meaning of the poem seems to be that all lovers, who are represented in this poem by Sheba and Solomon, attain in some degree to a simulacrum of the Fifteenth Phase, the phase of perfect beauty, where in the words of *A Vision*, Chance and Choice have become one, where the will and its object, thought and its object are indistinguishable, desire and effort meet— " nothing is apparent but the dreaming *Will* and the Image that it dreams."

> Yet the world ends when these two things,
> Though several, are a single light,
> Where oil and wick are burned in one ;
> Therefore a blessed moon last night
> Gave Sheba to her Solomon.

Hebraic mythology is introduced into this poem as an entirely fresh element : the crowing cockerel, that crowed last before the Fall, imagines that with the lovers' union under the full moon, perfection has been attained again and that the effects of the Fall have been cancelled out. It is incongruous enough to find the doctrine of the Fall, regarded by Christianity as a non-recurring event, woven into Yeats' cyclical theory of the movements of human life, but it does not make the poem less successful, and in *A Vision* Yeats does not hesitate to make Christ himself part of the recurring pattern. The lovers' attainment of the Fifteenth Phase is, however, temporary. The last words of the poem

> O Solomon ! let us try again.

are an indication that the wheel moves on, the elements are separated once more, and desire and effort return. " Solomon and the Witch " is not really a simple poem, but a highly complicated treatment of abstruse ideas. The ideas have not destroyed the lyric power, but it cannot, I think, be maintained

that the poem can be enjoyed " for itself " without an understanding of its esoteric meanings.[1]

The power which the thought of *A Vision* bestows is best seen in " The Second Coming " from the same collection. The image of the shape with lion body and the head of a man had been with Yeats as far back as 1887.[2] In the introduction to *The Resurrection* Yeats speaks of how when writing *On Baile's Strand* " I began to imagine, as always at my left side just out of the range of the sight, a brazen winged beast that I associated with laughing, ecstatic destruction." The image, however, does not become dynamic until the thought of *A Vision* has filled it out and only then is it written down as poetry. Against Christianity, itself become reasonable, arises an " antithetical dispensation . . . . which obeys imminent power, is expressive, hieratical, multiple, masculine, surgical." (*A Vision*, p. 273). In prose Yeats struggles to express what comes so easily and so powerfully in verse :

> The darkness drops again ; but now I know
> That twenty centuries of stony sleep
> Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
> And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born ?
>
> (" The Second Coming ".)

The poem would have been impossible without the cyclical system to which its meaning is so strictly a parallel. To the ordinary reader *A Vision* seems, in Macneice's words, " the most ingenious, the most elaborate, and the most arid of his writings," but the existence of this poem should warn us not to shrink from exploring a desert, which, however arid, can blossom into so unexpected a rose.

Essentially, however, the poems which we have been considering, together with a few others whose details and references show evidence of the work of the system, act as preliminaries to Yeats' most personal work, that in which he expresses the mythology of self in its richest and most complex

[1] Another example : It is very difficult to understand the third poem in " Meditations in Time of Civil War " with its reference to Juno's peacock without referring to *A Vision*, p. 268, where the cry of the peacock means the loss of control in a civilisation, " the last surrender, the irrational cry, revelation."

[2] Cf. note on p. 46 above.

form—the long meditative poems in *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* where the "self-possession and power" which Yeats declared were his debt to the unknown instructors are more in evidence than any actual borrowings. Their richness and complexity is due to a synthesis of many elements—the Irish background taking a prominent place. "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium," two poems dated 1927 and 1930, and complementary the one to the other are, however, unique, and they take their place among Yeats' most personal utterances. At the same time they are filled, to use Blake's phrase, with "minute particulars," with images which have the most exact references to the beliefs of *A Vision*. Yet at no point does the esoteric belief destroy the poetry or turn it into a text for exposition. We are told in the sacred book that states and eras of civilization share the phasal movement; the perfection of Byzantine civilization comes then with its Fifteenth Phase, and the Byzantium of these two poems is the Byzantium of that phase.[1] Byzantium had a special meaning for Yeats: "I think if I could be given a moment of Antiquity and leave to spend it where I chose, I would spend it in Byzantium a little before Justinian opened St. Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato." And again:

> I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers . . . spoke to the multitude and the few alike. The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject-matter and that the vision of a whole people.

In "Sailing to Byzantium," Byzantium becomes the equivalent of eternity, eternity seen in a specifically non-abstract form as a static historical moment poised between the "primary" and "antithetical" movements of history, as a city filled with objects of art, the craftsmanship of a period when through the reconciliation of opposites under the Fifteenth Phase the perfect work of art is produced, all works of art indeed, "building,

[1] Incidentally, Yeats is not much disturbed to find that according to historians the highest point of Byzantine civilization was reached at a date which does not correspond with his Phase Fifteen but with his Phase Twelve. See *A Vision*, p. 279 sqq.

picture, pattern, metal-work of rail and lamp," becoming " a single image." To this city, the soul, casting off the body of old age and rejecting the sensual profusion of life, travels and becomes itself a work of art :

> Once out of nature I shall never take
> My bodily form from any natural thing,
> But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
> Of hammered gold and gold enamelling.

In " Byzantium " this metal bird recurs as the principal image, but this time we are actually in Byzantium. Its " glory of changeless metal " stands in opposition to life's changing and confused sensuality. Yeats, like Dante, thinks of life after death as essentially a purification, and the section on the " Soul in Judgement " in *A Vision* is a description of a Purgatory. The task of the discarnate spirit is to purge away the " blood and mire " and the " bitter furies of complexity." At another point Yeats says that the task of the spirit is to free itself from its thoughts ; failure to do this results in a tragedy like that described in his last play *Purgatory*. " ' We have no power,' said an inhabitant of the state (" The Soul in Judgement "), ' except to purify our intention,' and when I asked of what, replied: 'Of complexity'." (p. 233.) The Byzantium of the poem is a place where this purification has been achieved, and image after image is brought into play to represent the purified elements—" the starlight or a moonlit dome," the metal bird, the Emperor's " golden smithies," the " marbles of the dancing floor "—all are drawn from Yeats' store of beliefs about Byzantium and all are related to his conception of a city at once historical and absolved from time. Into these purified elements enter even the " blood-begotten spirits," the unpurified, to join in an ecstatic dance of purification. With their triumph over the symbol of sensual confusion, " the dolphin-torn, the gong-tormented sea," the poem ends. Yeats has a sentence on the civilization of Byzantium which is an exact enough description of these poems : " an incredible splendour like that which we see pass under our closed eyelids as we lie between sleeping and waking, no representation of the living world but the dream of a somnambulist." The Byzantium poems are like hammered metal, refined in the fire of intense feeling, every inch crowded with figures. But they

are, at the same time, a most complex treatment of the esoteric material of *A Vision* and their imagery is drawn from a world of Yeats' own.[1]

Yeats, however, was not always so unequivocal in his rejection of " the fury and the mire of human veins." The long meditative poem called " The Tower " is partly concerned with the conflict between soul and self—a conflict which does not find its clearest expression until " A Dialogue of Self and Soul " of *The Winding Stair*. In " The Tower " is found a new mythological stratum, figures from Yeats' youth and from legends associated with the neighbourhood of Thoor Ballylee which are attuned to the personal ear, and are invoked much as the dead friends in " All Soul's Night " are summoned to drink from the wine-breath. These associations rise up from mind and memory like the spirits in a seance, called up by the poet to resolve his doubts and fears. The choice of Mrs. French, the imperious lady who clips off an insolent farmer's ears, is significant, because it is a sign of the new strand of thought that is being woven into the poems and is to take an increasingly important place. Mrs. French was an Irish landowner of the eighteenth century, the first representative of that phase of Irish history which was greatly to employ Yeats' imagination and at once to counterbalance and to complement the thought of *A Vision* and of the Byzantium poems—poems which imply a rejection of life while the eighteenth-century tradition implied a full-hearted acceptance of life lived according to a certain order and certain codes. These two apparent contraries Yeats never resolved. Thoor Ballylee is the setting for this invocation, and this house, with its tower and cottage, " decked and altered for a girl's love," is to become a principal symbol of this poetry, its meaning varying with the changes in Yeats' thought and intention.[2]

[1] To take one example from "Byzantium," the "flames begotten of flame" and " the agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve " are related to the ghost of a girl in a Japanese play known to Yeats. She is surrounded by flames, and " though the priest explains that if she but ceased to believe in those flames they would cease to exist, believe she must, and the play ends in an elaborate dance, the dance of her agony" (*A Vision*, p. 231 ; cf. *Per Amica*, p. 67). It is not fanciful to see in the reference to a sleeve that Yeats is thinking of the wide sleeves of a Japanese kimono : being of very light stuff these sleeves would catch alight the more easily and the fact that they do not enhances the image.

[2] For a good analysis of the changes in the tower symbolism see Louis Macneice, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, pp. 144–7.

Yeats' vision of existence has become double; he moves to and fro between shade and man; time in his poetry is no longer a succession of instants, but a kind of room—almost at times a lumber-room—where ghosts and the events of the past, the poet's self, Thoor Ballylee as it is and as it was co-exist:

> Before that ruin came, for centuries,
> Rough men-at-arms, cross-gartered to the knees
> Or shod in iron, climbed the narrow stairs,
> And certain men-at-arms there were
> Whose images, in the Great Memory stored,
> Come with loud cry and panting breast
> To break upon a sleeper's rest
> While their great wooden dice beat on the board.

This new power of assimilation and apprehension is largely the result of the experience of *A Vision*, whether or not that experience is to be regarded as a medium's message or merely as the maturation of Yeats' own thought. *A Vision* and its prologemenon are the signs of a new historical eye, a growth of consciousness which yields to Yeats far wider scope for his poetry than it had ever had before. The doors to history have been thrown wide open, and Yeats' belief in the truth and effectiveness of spiritualism gave him confidence that he had found the right end of an Ariadne's thread that would lead him into the heart of the historical labyrinth—the word "historical" here bearing not its more restricted meaning but that meaning by virtue of which history is made to include all forms of thought and all movements of life.

In the third section of "The Tower" Yeats takes a regretful farewell of the pride and sensuality of the body, joining it this time with the pride of the Irish Protestant tradition:

> The pride of people that were
> Bound neither to Cause nor to State,
> Neither to slaves that were spat on,
> Nor to the tyrants that spat,
> The people of Burke and of Grattan
> That gave, though free to refuse.

The fisherman, the "man who does not exist" of an earlier poem, the representative of the natural life, makes another

appearance and is seen to be related to the same tradition. Meanwhile Yeats will find consolation for old age with books and works of art, not the artefacts of Byzantium, but " learned Italian things " of the confused and sensual Renaissance.

The other meditative poems in *The Tower* are a wandering round these themes, a gradual building-up of the poet's personality. No single theme predominates, and the thought of *A Vision* goes side by side with thoughts of Ireland and the aristocratic tradition. Every theme is inverted towards the poet, " wound in mind's wandering." In contrast to the heartfelt acceptances and rejections of the Byzantium poems every gate to the heart is guarded and qualifications and reservations abound. Yeats' views on the civil war in Ireland, then raging, provide a famous example of this method, and one which runs through the poetry to the last. In " The Road at my Door " (Section V of " Meditations in Time of Civil War ") he envies the Irregulars, longing to share in their warlike drama, but in the next poem (" The Stare's Nest at my Window ") he condemns the brutalities of the civil war, mourning over " the dead young soldier " :

> We have fed the heart on fantasies
> The heart's grown brutal from the fare ;
> More substance in our enmities
> Than in our love.

Again, in " Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," his words are hard and satirical :

> We, who seven years ago
> Talked of honour and truth,
> Shriek with pleasure if we show
> The weasel's twist, the weasel's tooth.

Even the world of phantoms—which we may with reason term the world of *A Vision*—is in a state of degeneration. " I have assumed in the sixth poem that these horsemen" [the apparitions supposed to be seen by the country people] " now that the times worsen, give way to worse" (Note to "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen "), and the cry of " vengeance for Jacques Molay " shrieked by apparitions in the last poem in " Meditations in Time of Civil War " seemed to Yeats " a fit symbol for those who labour from hatred, and so for sterility

of various kinds." But this was not Yeats' last word on the subject. In the Ribh poems in *A Full Moon in March*, he praised hatred as

> A sort of besom that can clear the soul
> Of everything that is not mind or sense.

and in the *Last Poems* prayed for war and commended violence :

> Even the wisest man grows tense
> With some sort of violence . . .

In " Vacillation," a series of poems in *The Winding Stair*, he declares in rejecting Von Hügel and Christian belief that " Homer is my example and his unchristened heart " ; and by Homer he meant all that is primitive, spontaneous, violent, carrying with it its own beauty, like the Athenian olive-tree " self-sown and self-begotten." But in the same series comes the record of an experience which is also described in prose :

> My fiftieth year had come and gone,
> I sat, a solitary man,
> In a crowded London shop,
> An open book and empty cup
> On the marble table-top.
>
> While on the shop and street I gazed
> My body of a sudden blazed ;
> And twenty minutes more or less
> It seemed, so great my happiness,
> That I was blessèd and could bless.

The parallel passage is to be found in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae :*

> At certain moments, always unforeseen, I become happy . . . Perhaps I am sitting in some crowded restaurant . . . I look at the strangers near as if I had known them all my life, and it seems strange that I cannot speak to them : everything fills me with affection, I have no longer any fears or needs . . . latterly I seem to understand that I enter upon (this mood) the moment I cease to hate. (pp. 85-7.)

The dichotomy that is characteristic of this theme applies also to the other themes. The aristocratic theme is never whole and undivided, because Yeats is uncertain of its endur-

ance and its ultimate value. The admiration for the eighteenth-century Irish tradition can be traced right through *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*. Beginning as far back as " A prayer for my Daughter " it finds its finest expression in the two poems on Coole Park. Here again Yeats' method is that of the creation of a mythology. Coole Park, Lady Gregory's house, an actual place sanctified by personal memories and its own traditions, is, like Thoor Ballylee, a house of stone and a house of the spirit, an abstraction whose passionate life flows forth into minute and loving detail. Its swans, its woods, its subterranean stream become symbols of that vision of reality which Yeats claimed as the artist's vision, but at the same time they are so crowded with their own life and so filled with their own integrity, that nothing about them becomes mathematical ; like Wordsworth's mountain or Dante's " selva oscura," or like Yeats' own " rock-bred sea-borne bird," they have part at once in the real and the ideal world, illumined with the " glory and the freshness of a dream " :

> Another emblem there ! That stormy white
> But seems a concentration of the sky ;
> And like the soul it sails into the sight
> And in the morning's gone, no man knows why ;
> And is so lovely that it sets to right
> What knowledge or its lack had set awry,
> So arrogantly pure, a child might think
> It can be murdered with a spot of ink.

The conflict which can be observed within each theme is also seen in the inter-relationship of the themes. If the final tendency of the thought of *A Vision*, as exemplified in the Byzantium poems, is towards the rejection of body, the fulfilment of the soul's command in a later poem to " seek out reality, leave things that seem," Yeats was never reconciled to such a rejection. He had asked :

> What portion in the world can the artist have
> Who has awakened from the common dream
> But dissipation and despair ? ("Ego Dominus Tuus ".)

" Reality " when Yeats uses it in this sense means an ideal world, a world of Platonic Forms, in some sense the holy city of Byzantium itself, or the beauty of the Fifteenth Phase, where, desire and effort having met, there is no human life. But

against the myth of the phases he sets the counter-myth of Homer, of Sato's sword—" things emblematical of love and war "—joining to it the eighteenth-century Irish tradition of " hard-riding country gentlemen," the salt and savour of life itself. The conflict finds its clearest expression in " A Dialogue of Self and Soul " where the Soul speaks of deliverance from the cyclical system and the " crime of death and birth," but Self welcomes the returning wheel with all its toil and pain :

> I am content to live it all again
> And yet again, if it be life to pitch
> Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch
> A blind man battering blind men.

In this poem occurs one of Yeats' most splendid descriptions of the Fifteenth Phase, cognate with those in " The Double Vision " and the Byzantium poems and closely linked with the technical phraseology of *A Vision :*

> Such fullness in that quarter overflows
> And falls into the basin of the mind
> That man is stricken deaf and dumb and blind,
> For intellect no longer knows
> *Is* from the *Ought*, or *Knower* from the *Known*—
> That is to say, ascends to Heaven.

Even this, however, Self will reject for the " fury and the mire."

A further development of the Self's acceptance of the conditions of life is found in the value which has been described by other poets too as "joy." In *Last Poems* he welcomes the turning of the wheel with a terror that is mixed with joy :

> Heave no sigh, let no tear drop,
> A greater, a more gracious time is gone ;
> For painted forms or boxes of make-up
> In ancient tombs I sighed, but not again ;
> What matter ? Out of cavern comes a voice,
> And all it knows is that one word ' Rejoice ! '

Death also is equated with this value in the little poem that begins the " Vacillation " group. " Lapis Lazuli," one of the last poems, makes the statement that " Hamlet and Lear are gay "—gay with the formal discipline that their part in an artistic creation demands :

they, should the last scene be there,
The great stage curtain about to drop,
If worthy their prominent part in the play,
Do not break up their lines to weep.

They are gay in the sense that, being themselves artefacts they bear in themselves their own beauty and fulfilment, which, though tragic, is essentially an acceptance of the conditions of life. This is indeed true of all Shakespeare's great tragic figures. But even this value sinks into doubt and confusion in " The Man and the Echo " :

O Rocky Voice,
Shall we in that great night rejoice ?
What do we know but that we face
One another in this place ?
But hush, for I have lost the theme . . .

There are, however, moments when a reconciliation between these opposites is achieved, and these moments are found, if not in the life, then in the poetry. Such moments are the product of the conflict, although they may be reached independently of any immediate consciousness of the conflict. They are, I think, to be found in those images—or more than images—which are scattered throughout the poetry. The sailing swan of the Coole Park poems is one ; the sea-borne bird in " On a Political Prisoner," the chestnut tree of " Among School Children," perhaps the whole of " Leda and the Swan," the " marvellous stag of Arthur " in " Towards Break of Day," the stone in the stream of " Easter, 1916," and others, for the list is long. These moments are the highest point achieved by Yeats' particular method, the hanging of a reconciling image between the burning abstraction and the green leaves of fragmentary blind passion. Yeats has described the act and its effects :

A tree there is that from its topmost bough
Is half all glittering flame and half all green
Abounding foliage moistened with the dew ;
And half is half and yet is all the scene ;
And half and half consume what they renew,
And he that Attis' image hangs between
That staring fury and the blind lush leaf
May know not what he knows, but knows not grief.

(" Vacillation ".)

It is true that in contemplating these moments we know not what we know, except that the poetry at these points seems to take an upward leap, to become as it were a new form of experience. The claim has often been made that the experience of a work of art is in some sense an experience of reality, a looking, in Eliot's words, into " the heart of light, the silence". Definition here perhaps has no place, any more than it had in the ultimate experiences of St. John of the Cross or of Dante.[1] Yeats, in these moments, comes nearest to that experience, and he achieves such moments in particular by resolving passion and abstraction into a symbol, mythological in that its peculiar function is the co-inherence of the opposing elements.

There are many other poems in *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* than those we have been examining, but they fall into a different category, because they are less preoccupied with the poet's personality, less " wound in mind's wandering," but move into a clearer, sharper air, losing as they go, it is true, that complexity of image and richness of language which marks Yeats' best work. Before, however, these songs and poems are discussed, we must trace the development of the themes related to *A Vision* to their end in the series of plays which are contemporary to the work of the sacred book.

[1] Art as a gift from God and a means of communication with Him : every other function which has been claimed for art can, in the circumstances of the modern state, be equally well achieved by non-art (the cinema will soothe the savage breast better than Shakespeare).

Milton wrote with devout prayers to " that Divine Spirit which enricheth with all utterance and all knowledge." Yeats remarks :

" I think, too, that no fine poet, no matter how disordered his life, has ever, even in his mere life, had pleasure for his end. Johnson and Dowson . . . were dissipated men, the one a drunkard, the other a drunkard and mad about women, and yet they had the gravity of men who had found life out and were awakening from the dream ; and both, one in life and art and one in art and less in life, had a continual preoccupation with religion."

Per Amica Silentia Lunae, pp. 21-2.

CHAPTER IV

The Persecution of the Abstract

Con tanta suspizion far irmi
novella visione ch'a sè mi piega,
si ch'io non posso dal pensar partirmi.
Dante.

I

In an essay entitled " A People's Theatre : a Letter to Lady Gregory,"[1] written in 1919, Yeats was able to look back upon and sum up the achievement of the Abbey theatre. It is not surprising, in the light of our knowledge of the changes in his thought at this crucial period, to find that Yeats rejects the main part of that achievement. His rejection is coloured with the objective-subjective antithesis. The plays which had been most successful at the Abbey were those in which popular language, thought and characterization had been more and more a reflection of " the objective modern mind," more and more " a discovery of the simple emotions that make all men kin, clearing itself the while of sentimentality, the wreckage of an obsolete popular culture, seeking always not to feel and to imagine but to understand and to see." Yeats does not condemn this principle, but for himself he wanted something different, and the essay is really a forecast and a programme of the later plays. The new plays were to be a departure from the tradition that Synge and Lady Gregory and Yeats himself had created, the digging, to use the poet's own metaphor, of a new quarry :

> I want to create for myself an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never to many . . . I want to make . . . a feeling of exclusiveness, a bond among chosen spirits, a mystery almost for leisured and lettered people . . . I seek, not a theatre but the theatre's anti-self.

[1] Published together with earlier essays under the general heading " The Irish Dramatic Movement " in *Plays and Controversies* (1923).

Yeats largely succeeded in creating a body of dramatic work which is quite different from anything else either in his own previous work or in literary history. Many, if not all, of these plays draw upon the ideas formulated in *A Vision*, and it is this which bestows upon them their " mystery " and exclusiveness. We may judge that Yeats' search for the theatre's anti-self was much directed by the discovery that in the material from *A Vision* he now had ready to hand matter which might prove as fruitful in the dramatic as in the poetic medium. In any case he made the attempt, and it is useful to try and group the results of the effort not according to the technical changes and developments (which are considerable) but according to the various themes from *A Vision* round which the plays are built.

To put the matter at its simplest, *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919), *The Words upon the Window Pane* (1934) and *Purgatory* (1939) are three plays about ghosts, marked by quite different stylistic and technical devices but unified by a common idea. Yeats himself had no doubts about the ultimate importance of this idea or set of beliefs. The note on *The Dreaming of the Bones* in *Plays and Controversies* is a serious treatment of the theme of the play; the Introduction to *The Words upon the Window Pane* in *Wheels and Butterflies* is perhaps Yeats' fullest discussion of his later thought, a careful summary of the ideas that integrate his greatest poetry; and writing of *Purgatory* in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, Yeats declared: " I have put nothing into this play because it seemed picturesque; I have put there my own conviction about this world and the next."[1] *The Dreaming of the Bones* has its source (if we can use the word of materials that are contemporaneous with and interdependent upon each other) in the third Book of *A Vision* entitled " The Soul in Judgment." A young man who fought on the rebel side in the Dublin Easter Rising and is now in flight from the Government troops is confronted with the ghosts of Dermot and Dervorgilla, who were traditionally responsible for bringing the Norman invader to Irish shores in order to settle a private feud. The legendary pair are condemned for ever to the purgatorial " dreaming back " unless they can find someone of their own race who will forgive them for their crime. Although he is moved by their

[1] *Letters on Poetry* (1940), p. 202.

description of their state (which resembles that of Paola and Francesca) the young man refuses. Yeats tells us that this play was written prior to the discovery of the "Michael Robartes papers," but these may still be used as texts for the understanding of the play. The note on the *Dreaming of the Bones* in *Plays and Controversies* is a summary in non-technical language of the main ideas of "The Soul in Judgment":

> The conception of the play is derived from the world-wide belief that the dead dream back, for a certain time, through the more personal thoughts and deeds of life . . . The lovers in my play have lost themselves in a . . . self-created winding of the labyrinth of conscience.

Into the elaborate details of the mythological system there is no need to enter.[1] Yeats has, as in many of the poems, made the system come to life, but instead of personal association, he uses the Nō technique and figures drawn from Irish mythology. Yeats did not neglect the Irish side of his material and went to the trouble of getting somebody else to write out for him all the historical allusions to Dervorgilla. With the old mythology the new is combined: for the revolutionary soldier is himself of the kin Pearse or Connolly, fast becoming a creature of the heroic tradition.

In spite of the fact that *The Dreaming of the Bones* is a meeting-

[1] In Book III of *A Vision* the existence of the dead between death and birth into a new incarnation is divided into six states, of which the second, the "dreaming back" or "return", is the only one which receives any extended literary treatment. The states are: (i) "Vision of the Blood Kindred"—"a vision of those bound to us through *Husk* (or sense) and *Passionate Body* (objects of sense)." *op. cit*, pp. 223-4. (ii) The "Return" or "Dreaming Back," fully described, *op. cit*, p. 226. The object of the return is the separation of the spirit from sense and the objects of sense. "In the Dreaming Back the spirit is compelled to live over and over again the events that had most moved it . . . the painful are commonly the most intense and repeat themselves again and again." Thus the Return really consists of a series of dreamings back, until the intense events are "all related and understood, turned into knowledge." (cf. "The Man and the Echo"). At the end of the second state, the events of the past life are a whole and can be dismissed; the emotional and moral life, however, is but a whole according to the codes accepted in life. Hence follows (iii) the "Shiftings": the spirit in this state is purified of good and evil. (iv) The "Marriage" or "Beatitude": the spirit is in a state of complete equilibrium. (v) The "Purification": a new husk and passionate body appear, but in a completely purified form. (vi) The "Foreknowledge"; the spirit now knows precisely the nature of its next incarnation. This summary is the grossest simplification of the system. The extraordinary "otherness" of Yeats' thought appears very clearly in these passages.

ground of these traditions, the play is not overloaded. Its peculiar charm lies in its mingling of themes and in the way in which the sense of time is not lost but its immediacy sharpened by a continual shifting from the old to the new heroism and back again. The scene of the play is laid near the site of a ruined abbey. Dermot and Dervorgilla remember hearing during an earlier period of their purgatory the crowing of the cocks which were once kept by the monks. The musicians, too, sing of " the red bird of March," a permanent image which bears a symbolic relationship to the shifting planes. The disorder of time makes more vivid the heroic tradition, for a living tradition is ignorant of chronology. The ancient struggle appears in memories of a past event :

> Close to the altar
> Broken by wind and frost and worn by time
> Donogh O'Brien has a tomb, a name in Latin.
> He wore fine clothes and knew the secrets of women,
> But he rebelled against the King of Thomond
> And died in his youth.

The Civil War is invoked by a landscape :

> I can see
> The Aran Islands, Connemara hills,
> And Galway in the breaking light ; there too
> The enemy has toppled roof and gable,
> And torn the panelling from ancient rooms ;
> What generations of old men had known
> Like their own hands, and children wondered at,
> Has boiled a trooper's porridge.

The musicians' songs can be appraised for their own sake as poems :

> At the grey round of the hill
> Music of a lost kingdom
> Runs, runs and is suddenly still.
> The winds out of Clare-Galway
> Carry it : suddenly it is still.

They help to keep the play balanced, as it were, on that fine edge where chronological time and episodic history are no

longer relevant. They open and close what is really the performance of a ritual, nothing depending upon will and its conflicts, but everything on a grave and ordered movement, upon the contemplative and trance-like performance of a "mystery." The fact is significant for the later development of Yeats' dramatic art, which tends more and more towards the extraction of the ritualistic essence in drama.

The Words upon the Window Pane is an entirely different treatment of a similar theme, written in prose. At a Dublin séance, attended by a number of sitters some of whom are believers in spiritualism, others sceptics, the medium is interrupted in her attempt to get in touch with the more "orthodox" spirits by the voices of Swift and Hester Vanhomrigh in impassioned argument. After this has continued for some time the exhausted medium awakes, only to relapse, when all the sitters have gone, into Swift's voice again, crying out a few disconnected sentences. Here it is Swift and Vanessa who are condemned to the dreaming back. "Dr. Trench," one of the believers, explains in terms which are parallel to the explanations of *A Vision*:

> Some spirits are earth-bound—they think they are still living and go over and over some action of their past lives, just as we go over and over some painful thought, except that where they are thought is reality . . . Sometimes a spirit re-lives not the pain of death but some passionate or tragic moment of life . . . If I were a Catholic I would say that such spirits were in Purgatory . . . Such spirits do not often come to séances unless these séances are held in houses where the spirits lived, or where the events took place.

In the long introductory essay attached to this play Yeats lays special emphasis on two of its aspects—the Protestant culture of eighteenth-century Ireland, and spiritualism, two things which superficially seem opposed to one another but are actually both related to the mythological search. We have already seen how the Protestant culture had begun to take its place in Yeats' verse. In the introductory essay Yeats explains how he turned away from the patriotism of Taylor and O'Leary, who would have no truck with Burke and Goldsmith because they had been assimilated into the English tradition, or with

Swift because his writings were in the classical rather than the romantic tradition. Now, however, Swift haunts him, but has Yeats' manner of perception really changed? Swift in his turn has become part of a mythology:

> Sometimes it is a thought of my great-great grandmother . . . sometimes it is S. Patrick's (Cathedral) . . . sometimes I remember something hard or harsh in O'Leary or in Taylor . . . that reminds me by its style of his verse or prose. Did he (Swift) not speak, perhaps, with just such an intonation? This instinct for what is near and yet hidden is in reality a return to the sources of our power, and therefore a claim made upon the future . . . Thought seems more true, emotion more deep, spoken by someone who touches my pride, who seems to claim me of his kindred, who seems to make me a part of some national mythology, nor is mythology mere ostentation, mere vanity if it draws me onward to the unknown.[1]

Swift is seen as the interpreter of the deeper, instinctive race-movements of his age, of the "national spirit," even as one of Yeats' passionate fragmentary men, recognizing no compulsion but their own natures. When Swift, as the last representative of this class, dies, Locke and the Industrial Revolution follow as a matter of course. Yeats' thought in these passages is diverse and his transition from matters of fact to aphoristic fantasies more abrupt and disconcerting than usual. It is clear, however, that Yeats saw Swift not so much as stylist, philosopher, satirist, or in any of the roles which he plays in the textbooks, but as a link in the chain of the national mythology which begins with Cuchulain and ends with the O'Rahilly writing in blood on the wall of the Post Office. To Yeats history was the history of personality, the Protestant culture of the eighteenth century was a part of history and Swift was the supreme figure of that culture. Swift, though, however exalted his position in the historical theme, was also a man split and shadowed by an internal struggle whose exact nature is unknown, and the dramatic conflict in *The Words upon the Window Pane* arises from this mysterious darkness. The play itself is concerned with Swift the man, not with Swift the national Symbol. The essay and the play are the halves that make up the whole of one of the best and most detailed

[1] *Wheels and Butterflies* (1934), pp. 7-8.

examples of Yeats' interpretation of history-through-personality, of the process of "preferring Socrates to his thought."

The other aspect which Yeats stresses is the spiritualistic. In a sense spiritualism is the key which opens the door to the world of *A Vision*, especially of that part of *A Vision* that is concerned with the dead. Yeats, although he rejected the scientific method, was still sufficiently of his age to require some empirical proofs of the existence of his phantasmagoria; he is never tired of telling spiritualistic anecdotes, many from his own experience. (Perhaps, indeed, the earlier experiences were the match that set fire to the train.) But his acceptance of spiritualism—or rather of the communication with the dead which the medium claimed to establish—is equivocal, and the last pages of the introductory essay are typical of this equivocation. Yeats distinguishes, with more than a hint of scientific systematization, between manifestations which are merely the result of the sitters' thoughts and desires acting upon the medium and "new beings begotten by spirit upon medium to live short but veritable lives." "Spirit" here is the "timeless individuality," which subsists throughout all temporal and spatial changes, the archetype whose manifestations recur eternally. "If we accept this idea," Yeats writes, "many strange and beautiful things become credible." In the poet's youth strange and beautiful things had not required the seal of credibility such as this: the moving lights on Knocknarea had been credible and satisfactory because of a traditional peasant belief. Now, however, the strange and beautiful demand pseudo-scientific witnesses, and chief among these stands the medium with her automatic birds and sealed bottles. Such was the concession that Yeats came to make to the spirit of the age.

Moreover, unless we have an understanding of Yeats' distinction between seance-room manifestations which are merely a result of thought-transference and "those new beings begotten by spirit upon the medium to live short but veritable lives," we miss the whole point of *The Words upon the Window-Pane*. Yeats, with this distinction in mind, tricks his audience rather cleverly. Up to the last few lines of the play the whole of the conversation or conflict between Swift and Stella is explicable as a thought-transference from one of the sitters, John Corbet, who is represented as a student of Swift engaged

upon a study of the Swift-Stella relationship on the basis of the theory that it was Swift's fear of madness that made him refuse to marry Stella. When everyone has gone, however, the medium, a woman so ignorant of Swift that she has scarcely heard his name, suddenly relapses from her own voice into that of Swift. She becomes a vehicle of the spirit—the " new being " is begotten upon her. The audience is for the moment galvanized into belief by the shock. Yeats is, in fact, trying to induce that " violent shock " which will, he believes, flower into the " Sense of spiritual reality." To this technique he refers in the introduction to *The Resurrection.* The point is that thought-transference, if proven, merely requires us to revise our ideas of physics and human physiology ; belief in the "new spirits " means the creation of a new teleology, a more difficult task, and one which Yeats himself certainly had not accomplished to his own or anyone else's satisfaction.

Purgatory is the barest and most economical of these three plays, written in a blank verse entirely devoid of rhetoric. The characters are reduced to two. Though superficially it appears simpler, *Purgatory* is actually a more complex treatment of the theme of the " dreaming back " than either *The Dreaming of the Bones* or *The Words upon the Window Pane*, and contains more of those elements of conflict, suspense, and action which have come to be regarded as the *sine qua non* of tragedy (though they were not so regarded by Yeats). Two wandering beggars, an old man and his bastard son, a boy of sixteen, come to a ruined house whose history is revealed by the father. In this house the father had been born, the son of an aristocratic woman who had married a drunken gamekeeper. When the old man was sixteen (the same age as the boy in the play) the gamekeeper burned down the house in a drunken fit and on the same night his son stabbed him to death in the ruins with a jack-knife and fled abroad to become a beggar. Now the house is inhabited by the tortured spirits of the gamekeeper and his wife who enact their wedding night over and over again : the bridegroom's horsehooves are heard, the figure of his bride appears at a lighted window of the ruin. In an effort to end this chain of consequence, the old man stabs the boy with his jack-knife. But the horsehooves are heard again, showing that the cycle has not been broken. The play ends with a despairing cry :

Her mind cannot hold up that dream.
Twice a murderer and all for nothing,
And she must animate that dead night
Not once but many times !
O God,
Release my mother's soul from its dream !
Mankind can do no more. Appease
The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead.

The new element in the play is the ultimate dependence of the characters who are in a state of " dreaming back " upon God. To some of the souls in Purgatory, those who have transgressed against others, others may bring help by bringing to an end the chain of consequence which the original crime had set in motion, as the old man had hoped to do by killing the last representative of the "polluted blood." But for those who have transgressed against themselves :

There is no help but in themselves
And in the mercy of God.

Yeats declared that he had put into this play his convictions about this world and the next. In it, the presentation of the ideas of *A Vision* in dramatic form reached a new level of force and subtlety, combining the realism of *The Words upon the Window Pane* with the ceremonious mythology of *The Dreaming of the Bones*. The old man in *Purgatory* is a type-figure, the mouthpiece of the doctrine as well as its protagonist ; the economy with which the story is handled makes *Purgatory* technically the most skilful of the three plays.

These three plays are to be regarded each as an attempt to make dramatic capital out of the material supplied by *A Vision*. The progression in method is interesting—from the heroic mythology of tradition through the new personalized mythology, created round the Protestant culture and summed up in the figure of Swift, to *Purgatory*, where mythological characters drop away and nothing is left but the sticks and stones of incident and belief. In this sense the play is parallel to the poem in the same volume called " The Circus Animals' Desertion." The characters in *Purgatory* are almost pure " emblem " : character " isolated by a deed " is of no interest to Yeats now (who cares whether Swift feared madness ?). The dramatist is

concerned to get only to the heart of the matter, which in this case is the idea that unpurified spirits are condemned to relive incidents out of their past lives, and he tries to present it as effectively as he can. The result is a bare style and a theme pollarded to the very trunk. It is important to note, however, that the theme of this play also reflects something more ancient—the sacrificial slaying of son by father that the victim's blood may appease an ancestral spirit. In plays written prior to *Purgatory* as we shall see, Yeats had shown a similar pre-occupation with ritualistic survivals.

Yeats' conception of purgatory and life after death implies no system of punishment or retribution " from above," and has no Christian moral flavour. Yeats goes out of his way to deny any moral or beneficial intention of the " teaching spirits." (*A Vision*, p. 234). "God" appears in *Purgatory* as a being apparently empowered to influence the deterministic cycles, but this is an exception. Yeats does not seem to have felt the lack. In " The Man and the Echo " the " spiritual intellect " engaged on its task of reducing the chaos of phenomena to order, is the value which acts as moral and metaphysical sanction. The discarnate spirit in the second and third " states " carries out a similar task, but merely in order that it may fulfil its allotted cycle. Yeats did, however, approach the religious myth in his two plays about Christ, *Calvary* (1920) and *The Resurrection* (1931). Both plays explore the nature of Christianity from the point of view of a non-Christian speculative thinker. In *Calvary* Christ is faced with examples of those who are beyond the reach of salvation and consequently beyond the reach of His power—Lazarus because he is represented as having no wish to live (probably a reminiscence of Oscar Wilde's fable); Judas because his treachery was a deliberate choice made in order that he might be free of Christ; and the Roman soldiers because they have no need of His help. In addition, there are the birds of the musicians' songs (" God has not died for the white heron "), who are symbols of subjective loneliness, sufficient unto themselves and in need of no saviour. Yeats' lengthy note smooths away the difficulties of interpretation and contains the somewhat cynical reflection : " A reader can always solve the mystery or learn the secret by turning to a note."[1] *Calvary* is Yeats' only

[1] " A Note on *Calvary* " in *Plays and Controversies*, pp. 458–60.

attempt at discussing the theological aspects of Christianity, and his criticisms are based in one case on an idea of Wilde's (which has neither validity nor authority), in the second case on an erroneous interpretation of the doctrine of free will, and in the third case on a false conception of the doctrine of salvation. In *The Resurrection* Yeats returns to the familiar ground of the interaction of history and myth and is consequently much happier. As in *The Words upon the Window Pane*, Yeats' object is to administer a shock to the audience, the kind of shock that will induce a " sense of spiritual reality." After the Crucifixion the eleven Apostles are gathered in the upper room ; a Greek and a Hebrew, who are guarding them, argue about the nature of Christ. Each man represents two opposing aspects of the *Weltanschauung* which Christianity overthrew. The Greek maintains that Christ was a phantom : " We Greeks understand these things. No god has ever been buried ; no god has ever suffered." The Hebrew advances a rationalistic interpretation : " He was nothing more than a man, the best man who ever lived. Then some day when he was very tired . . . . he thought that he himself was the Messiah." While they are arguing, some worshippers of Dionysus gather under the windows singing and dancing; their "self-abasement and self-surrender " and the whole character of their religion partakes of that " fabulous, formless darkness " of which Christianity is another aspect, a further revolution of the wheel. In the two songs for the folding and unfolding of the curtain Dionysus and Christ are parallels :

> I saw a staring virgin stand
> Where holy Dionysus died,
> And tear the heart out of his side,
> And lay the heart upon her hand
> And bear that beating heart away.

For, as the Dionysiacs fall silent, the figure of Christ enters the room. The Greek, convinced that the figure is a phantom without flesh and blood, touches its side and finds there a beating heart : " O Athens, Alexandria, Rome, something has come to destroy you. The heart of a phantom is beating ".[1]

[1] This particular form of " shock " was taken from an incident in Crooke's *Studies in Psychical Research*. Crookes found the heart of a materialized form beating. v. *Wheels and Butterflies*, p. 109. The central situation of the play is therefore derived from spiritualism.

There is no more moral colouring in *The Resurrection* than in the three plays which develop out of the purgatory theme. Christ is on the same ground as Dionysus because both are the heroes of a religious myth; it is the dying god, not the moral teacher, who will change the direction of the world's history. Yeats is raising the myth to its old position as historical first cause. In *The Wanderings of Oisin* (so Yeats tells us), with all its elaborate pattern and detail, the poet was trying to make a counter-myth to answer the myth of progress—that is to say, the old Irish mythological material was to fulfil a symbolic purpose, its meaning is something attached to it externally, the image and the idea meet but do not fuse. This is the method which Yeats applied to all the Irish material of which he made use for dramatic purposes. Even in *The Dreaming of the Bones* Dermot and Dervorgilla are only lay figures dragged up from the depths of Irish mythology for Yeats to make what use of them he will. A series of abstract ideas are linked to a series of mythological characters: Yeats has not yet achieved in the drama the fusion of the two which appears in the poetry. In some of the poems, as we have seen, this fusion did occur in momentary images which gain thereby that power "in which the gazing heart doubles its might". But a dramatic play is not the same medium as a poem, and the same methods will not bring the same results. In *The Resurrection* and to an extent in *The Words upon the Window Pane*, Yeats started off on a different path designed to bring him to a similar destination. In *The Resurrection* there is no separation between the myth and the meaning which attaches to the myth. The central situation of the play—the touching of the heart—is in itself not only the shock which is administered to the nerve centre of the Western world, but the symbolic act within which the myth and its meaning meet. The collapse of the medium in *The Words upon the Window Pane* is a similar device—the abstract idea of the "dreaming back" is rendered dynamic by a dramatic act. In the poetry it is the image that constitutes the meeting place, in the plays the symbolic act.

The implications are various. Yeats' dramatic art tends more and more towards the representation of myth on the stage not in the old way, by making any suitable mythological characters speak and act out his abstract themes, but by actually showing the myth as it happens. The abstractions are already

within its substance. If we accept the theory that the myths of the world are descriptions of the rituals that preceded them, and not distorted accounts of historical events,[1] Yeats was actually leading both myth and drama back to their common ritual cradle. That some of the last plays of Yeats do tend more and more towards the representation of ritual acts and little else (Macneice calls them " charades ") cannot be denied.

The Cat and the Moon (1926), *The King of the Great Clock Tower* and its revised version, *A Full Moon in March* (1935), together with *The Herne's Egg* (1938), all share this ritualistic element, combined with other features that have a recognizable affinity with the ideas of *A Vision*. In these plays, however, these latter features take a second place; what is important is the form of the isolated myth and its realisation in action. *The Cat and the Moon* is a humorous treatment of the story of a lame man and a blind man who set out to find a holy well: " I wanted to give the Gaelic League," Yeats writes in the Introduction, " or some like body, a model for little plays, commemorations of known places and events." *The Cat and the Moon* is a " light entertainment " designed to fill in gaps between bigger things. What is interesting about it is Yeats' own remark that he had tried to keep abstract ideas out of the play. The blind man represents the body, the lame man the soul, the cat is the normal man seeking his anti-self, and so on. . . . But, Yeats declares:

> I had to bear in mind that I was among dreams and proverbs, that though I might discover what had been and might be again an abstract idea, no abstract idea must be present. The spectator should come away thinking the meaning as much his own manufacture as that of the blind man and the lame man had seemed mine.

In *A Full Moon in March* and *The King of the Great Clock Tower* Yeats breaks even further away from the persecution of the abstract. The plays are alternative versions of the same myth: a beggar comes to the throne of a queen and offers to sing before her. He is beheaded, the severed head sings, the

[1] For discussion of this vexed point see Raglan, *The Hero* (1936), works by J. E Harrison and others. According to Raglan the sequence is—ritual; myth; drama; and written history only with the comparatively recent development of an accurate chronological perspective.

queen dances before it and embraces it. These plays are as much the creation of the adapted Nō technique as of anything else, for they would be unthinkable without it. Their chief merit lies in the songs, which are good examples of the " Crazy Jane " kind of verse with their curiously unsure but lilting metric and their refrains ; but to Yeats himself the dances, or rather the ritual movements, were at least as important. It is in the songs that most of the elements traceable to *A Vision* occur. The last song of the Attendants in *The King of the Great Clock Tower* refers to the old conflict between the fury and the mire of human veins and the absolute values of the Fifteenth Phase or of Byzantium :

First attendant : I cannot face that emblem of the moon,
Nor eyelids that the unmixed heavens dart,
Nor stand upon my feet, so great a fright
Descends upon my savage, sunlit heart.
What can she lack whose emblem is the moon ?

Second attendant : But desecration and the lover's night.

Another song in *The King of the Great Clock Tower* is about the survival of the dead :

O, but I saw a solemn sight,
Said the rambling, shambling, travelling-man,
Castle Dargan's ruin all lit,
Lovely ladies dancing in it.

O, what is life but a mouthful of air ?
Said the rambling, shambling, travelling-man,
Yet all the lovely things that were
Live, for I saw them dancing there.

But what the songs are about is no longer important and the world of abstract ideas can remain closed. The plays are merely the embodiment of ritual in myth, performed for their own sake and the sake of the music and dancing. In the Preface to the volume Yeats makes a casual reference to the fact that they are in some respect reproductions of an ancient and sacred ritual of the slain god and the mother goddess. It would make for theoretical completeness if it could be proved that Yeats had returned to the idea of drama as sacred ritual, but there are no grounds for supposing that Yeats was trying to read this

kind of significance into his work. The plays stand by themselves; they are patterns in a carpet. The magical gestures are retained, although the magical way of thought is absent. It is as though some dramatist, ignorant alike of Christianity and history, were to make a play out of the Communion Service.

In *The Herne's Egg* Yeats invents a myth which expresses in partial form his favourite antithesis of subjective and objective forces. In a sense, it is the climax of this particular group of plays, drawing much on the ideas germinated in *A Vision*, but at the same time coloured throughout with satire and high spirits. Its irresponsibility is akin to the irresponsibility of many of the last poems, as though Yeats, mounted on the mythological stilts could not forget the miry ground below and mocked himself for tumbling down upon it. When the play opens, Congal and Aedh have just fought their fiftieth drawn battle; to celebrate, Congal and his men try to steal some herne's eggs for the feast. They succeed, but not until Attracta, a priestess, who is the dedicated bride of the Great Herne, has cursed Congal and prophesied his death at a fool's hand. At the feast Attracta, acting under the compulsion of the Great Herne, substitutes a common hen's egg for the herne's egg on Congal's plate. Congal thinks that Aedh has chosen this means to insult him, challenges his old enemy to battle and kills him with a table-leg. Then, declaring that it is time her mind was rid of her obsessions about the Great Herne, Congal and six of his men lie with Attracta. But the Great Herne is revenged through the fulfilment of the curse: Congal is about to die at the hands of a fool on the summit of the holy mountain Slieve Fuadhe, but kills himself instead by falling on a kitchen spit. Two donkeys are coupling in a field below, and Congal is thereby fated to live his next life in the guise of a donkey:

> All that trouble and nothing to show for it,
> Nothing but just another donkey.

The properties in this play—the donkeys, table-legs, kitchen-spits and such like—show how far the Aristophanic treatment is carried. The changes in Yeats' style and the irresponsible, satirical mood—at the greatest possible remove from the grandeur of the speech in plays like *At the Hawk's Well* and

The Dreaming of the Bones—are well seen in the speech of Pat, one of Congal's soldiers, after the discovery of the substituted egg :

> Herne's egg, hen's egg, great difference.
> There's insult in that difference.
> What do hens eat ? Hens live upon mash,
> Upon slop, upon kitchen odds and ends.
> What do hernes eat ? Hernes live on eels,
> On things that must always run about.
> Man's a high animal and runs about,
> But mash is low, O, very low.
> Or, to speak like a philosopher,
> When a man expects the movable
> But gets the immovable, he is insulted.

Although it is not difficult to regard *The Herne's Egg* purely as a high-spirited scherzo in Yeats' latest manner, various undertones of symbolic meaning are discernible in it. The Great Herne is one of the " lonely birds " of whom Yeats wrote in the Note on *Calvary*, and Attracta shares his characteristics :

> Certain birds, especially as I see things, such lonely birds as the heron, hawk, eagle and swan, are the natural symbols of subjectivity . . . subjective men are the more lonely the more they are true to type, seeking always that which is unique or personal.

Such were the birds that Christ's death could not save. Attracta says :

> I lay with the Great Herne, and he,
> Being all a spirit, but begot
> His image in the mirror of my spirit,
> Being all sufficient to himself
> Begot himself.

The play really depicts a conflict between the objective, the fragmentary passionate man who is Congal, and the inhuman subjectivity of the Great Herne, but this contest ends in a singularly unheroic and satirical fashion in " just another donkey." Other elements have a recognizable origin from the " system " : the bird-woman theme derives from Yeats' favourite myth of Leda and the Swan ; the death at the hands

of a fool, like Cuchulain's end in *The Death of Cuchulain* is related to Yeats' concept of the fool as the type of the twenty-seventh Phase :

> He is but a straw blown by the wind, with no mind but the wind and no act but a nameless drifting and turning.[1]

At his worst, the Fool is malign, " obeying obscure unconscious fantasies." His presence in this play lends point to the essential aimlessness of the whole struggle. The subjective principle cannot " win " any more than it can beget a child : but it is equally impossible for the fragmentary man to defeat it. Congal and the Great Herne fight a dance-battle like that with which the play opens, their weapons cannot touch.

From *The Dreaming of the Bones* to *The Herne's Egg* is a long journey to make in search of a theme. As we have seen, the choice was usually made from a combination of the abstractions of *A Vision* with mythological characters from other spheres, resulting often in a new myth or a variation so extensive as to be virtually the creation of a new myth. One remarkable feature of the whole treatment and indeed of the system itself is its more or less complete atheism. " It is possible," remarks Dr. Harrison, " to have a living and vigorous religion without a theology."[2] Another writer, quoting the examples of Buddhism, Jainism and the Vedic religion, adds :

> Thus there are rites without gods, and even rites from which gods are derived. All religious powers do not emanate from divine personalities, and there are relations of cult which have other objects than uniting man to a deity.[3]

If it be true that God is an image created as the result of a need, and not present when the need is absent, Yeats, an image-maker *par excellence*, cannot have felt the lack of this the supreme Image. I have suggested in the previous chapter that the " system " served a strictly functional need ; that it came into

[1] *A Vision*, p. 182. But see below, Chapter V.

[2] Jane Harrison, *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1921), p. 27.

[3] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1926), p. 35.

being largely because of Yeats' desire to reduce the chaos of history and personality to order, essentially one of the main tasks which a religious system must undertake. A religious system is separable from the idea of God, a fact to which primitive ritual often testifies. We cannot, however, declare unequivocally that Yeats' belief partook of the nature of an atheistic religious system, although certainly those aspects of his belief that appear in the plays discussed in this chapter seem to be almost entirely atheistical. Yeats did write one play about belief in God—*The Hour Glass* (1914), in which a materialist philosopher, who has long taught that " there is nothing we cannot touch, nothing we cannot see," is confuted by the appearance of an angel. The angel tells him that he must die within the hour unless he can find some believer to testify to his faith, but all have been so well schooled by the philosopher that he can find no one who is not materialist and atheist. At length, he resigns himself to the Divine Will so that, though he dies, his soul is saved. *The Hour Glass* is not a very convincing work, and perhaps its least convincing part is the passage where the dying philosopher assents to God's will. Where God is allowed to appear within the picture of belief, Yeats prefers to regard Him as the end of the process, not as the immanent factor, the living god, which Christianity propounds. When man has been stripped of everything he will find God: I quote from the prose version of *The Hour Glass :*

> Go and call my pupils again. I will make them understand. I will say to them that only amid spiritual terror or only when all that laid hold on life is shaken can we see truth . . . We sink in on God, we find him in becoming nothing —we perish into reality.

In the same way, in *The Unicorn from the Stars*, Martin awakes from his trance to declare :

> I saw in a broken vision, but now all is clear to me. Where there is nothing, where there is nothing—there is God !

Yeats maintained and developed this conception of deity. In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* he had said that " we must not make a false faith by hiding from ourselves the causes of doubt," and in a late essay we find him writing :

> To seek God too soon is not less sinful than to seek God too late; we must love man, woman or child, we must exhaust ambition, intellect, desire, dedicating all things as they pass, or we come to God with empty hands.[1]

The general direction of Yeats' thought then was hardly so atheistic as *A Vision* alone might lead us to believe. But the thought of plays like *The Hour Glass* is entirely swamped by the uprush of the "system." The moral to be drawn from these apparent contradictions of thought is an ever closer perception of the truth that lies in the "unknown instructors'" preliminary statement that they had come to give the poet metaphors for his poetry. This statement is seen to be true in a far wider and deeper sense than is at first apparent. *A Vision* was not only the product of the artistic conscience but at the same time itself marked out the boundaries beyond which that conscience could not stray without becoming desensitized and so incapable of creation. In an Elegy on the death of Yeats, W. H. Auden wrote:

> You were silly like us: your gift survived it all,

implying that Yeats' poetry was a triumph over the difficult circumstances of his obscure and complicated and largely valueless thought. Auden was wrong, for, while it is true that *A Vision* has no intrinsic value, in its intimate relationship with the poetry it meant everything—or nearly everything—to Yeats the artist. Few will be found to assent to the philosophical and teleological implications of *Purgatory*, many to the implied theological doctrines of *The Hour Glass*, but while the former play is an artistic success, the latter is emphatically not.

If meditation upon God be one of the characteristics of most "higher religions," meditation upon Death is scarcely less important. Here Yeats' work presents a rather different picture. There is scarcely one of the plays considered in this chapter which is not preoccupied with the nature and experience of death; systems of bodily and spiritual survival are all evidences of a consuming interest in eschatology. It is a very common thing in European literature to find Death personified

[1] *Essays*, 1931–6 (Cuala Press), p. 129.

as an active entity who goes purposefully hither and thither, taking some and sparing others. The Dances of Death provide a famous example, and most of our metaphors about Death make Death the subject of a verb : Death comes, takes, rides and so on. In the famous speech of Romeo in the vaults of Capulet, Death is an advancing army, as well as a lover. In Jonson's epitaph on the Countess of Pembroke or Donne's sonnet on the last Judgment, the death of Death is the principal image. Death and his brother sleep are a favourite personification. Quite recently, in one of Julien Green's novels (*Le Visionnaire*), Death is personified as a gross and sinister housekeeper. The examples could be multiplied indefinitely and the image is in many ways one of the principal images in the common mind. Collins' classical personifications or the nineteenth-century habit of erecting statues to Hygeia, Prosperitas and the rest are now viewed with distaste, but Death is still Person, and the numerous newspaper cartoons which show political figures in various kinds of relationship with Death show what a hold the image has upon the popular imagination.

Rilke was one of the first poets consciously to substitute for this conception of an externalized, malignant Death, the idea of a personal death, death as an experience peculiar to the individual and one modified by the individual stance. Towards the end of his life, as we learn from *Letters on Poetry*, Yeats read Rose's article on Rilke's idea of death and was disgusted at what he understood to be Rilke's morbid pre-occupation with this theme. Yeats also rejected by implications the popular image of Death as Person, and there are very few signs of its appearance in his poetry. (A no ble exception is the poem " Three Things," with its opening line, " O cruel Death, give three things back."). To Yeats, certainly at the time when these plays were being written, the death of an individual was merely a link in the chain of his existences ; Death could not have the drastic finality of impact in the cyclical system which it has even to a Christian believer. (Pascal could never forget having seen a spade standing in the earth thrown up from a newly dug grave). It is a mistake to suppose, however, that because Yeats had created the system to answer a need, he was bound to it in the same sense that a Christian is bound by the creed or a primitive by the tabu.

This indeed is the corollary to the conclusion that was drawn about the deistic aspect of Yeats' belief. His artistic conscience remained free, and the details of the system were sometimes merely ignored even when themes very close to the major themes of *A Vision* were being treated: Congal is born as a donkey without intervention from the cyclical system because the play's scheme demands it, just as the poem "At Algeciras: a Meditation upon Death" might have been written by an orthodox Christian. Yeats' treatment of the nature and experience of death tends to fluctuate according to the closeness with which the plays adhere to the cyclical system. In *The Dreaming of the Bones*, *The Words upon the Window Pane* and *Purgatory*, where the adherence is fairly close, Death is an event of little importance; it is Death as an after-state of life that is emphasized. The plotted, charted world of the dead makes up the substance of the plays' thought. In *The Resurrection* Christ the dying god introduces confusion into this pattern: "man and god live each other's life, die each other's death." The plays about the severed head have little to do with the system: Yeats had in an earlier poem equated Death with joy, and life and joy in *A Full Moon in March* arise from the symbolic death; the dead lips sing and the queen conceives from the blood. Lastly, as Macneice points out, Yeats "sometimes writes as if death contained the formal cause that gives motive and significance to our actions in life":

THE WHEEL.

Through winter-time we call on spring,
And through the spring on summer call,
And when abounding hedges ring
Declare that winter's best of all;
And after that there's nothing good
Because the spring-time has not come—
Nor know that what disturbs our blood
Is but its longing for the tomb.[1]

[1] With this we may compare the passage in Julien Green:
". . . Ne sentez-vous pas tout ce que la présence de la mort détruit d'illusions autour d'elle? Nous sommes ses enfants qu'elle dérobe aux mensonges. Du fond de la vie, elle nous appelle. A l'âge même où nous ne comprenons pas le langage des hommes, nous nous arrêtons quelquefois au milieu de nos jeux pour écouter sa voix . . . Et tout le long des années, elle nous fait signe." *Le Visionnaire*, pp. 248-9.

It is in line with Yeats' own thought to remark that not only have the eschatological doctrines shattered themselves to pieces after the " unity " of the Middle Ages, but Death-images and Death-phantasies are as various and as little shared. One would not naturally expect three English poets of roughly the same generation to differ so widely in the thoughts and images which death arouses—certainly it would have been impossible at a period of " unity of culture." But compare Housman's " Soldier from the wars returning," Edward Thomas's " Lights Out," and Yeats' " Byzantium." Reading them, we pass through the desert of nihilism born of the atrophy of the classical energies, through the forest of speculative sensitivity which the collapse of a different order engendered, to stand at the foot of a brightly-lit stage whose gongs and masks, like a bonfire in the middle of a jungle, endeavour to keep off the outer darkness.

Yeats' escape from the persecution (the word is his own) of the abstract ideas of *A Vision* was never complete, and in *Purgatory*, the last play of all, he returned to them as the expression of his deepest convictions. When he spoke of this persecution Yeats was probably thinking of himself as an artist, beginning instinctively to reject what had come to seem to his artistic conscience over-elaborate and artificial. Thus behind the high seriousness of many of the plays I have been considering, there lurk—as in many of the poems—the Fool and Crazy Jane, representatives of aimless joy and of the natural life. They form part of a counter-myth; their place in the programme resembles that of the satires at the Greek dramatic festivals, or, in certain respects—it is hardly necessary to search for more recondite parallels—of Shakespeare's Fools. The relationship of these characters to the rest of the work must now be considered.

CHAPTER V

The Horror of Daybreak

Why are you now so brief? Do you no longer love,
As once you did, the song? Since, in the days of hope,
As a youth, when you sang, you
Could never attain the end?
As my joy, so is my song.

Hölderlin.

Through the essays on the Irish dramatic movement which Yeats gathered into volume in 1923, one theme, spoken and unspoken, runs like a refrain. Untiringly he preached that art must spring from the popular imagination and that the only true culture is that which displays the kind of unity that was the characteristic of his imagined Byzantium, where the artist is "absorbed in his subject-matter, and that the vision of a whole people":

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory thought
All that we did, all that we said or sang
Must come from contact with the soil, from that
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.
We three alone in modern times had brought
Everything down to that sole test again,
Dream of the noble and the beggar-man.

The lines emphasize, and with justice, the gulf that separated Yeats from his contemporaries. Even while he wrote, a new genre was being created and "working-class art" filled the bookshops; on the other side of the fence certain critics and poets proclaimed that "poetry must be difficult" and were prepared to see the creative impulse confine itself for many generations to the initiated few. Yeats' answer to this situation was his gospel of "unity of culture," and he had hoped to create a microcosm of that culture in Ireland. Yeats was, however, in the difficult position of most reformers who are at the same time spiritual purists. He himself was an intellectual aristocrat and a solitary-minded man, and he found himself faced with a situation in which disunity of culture had

already inflicted irreparable damage on popular taste. To this taste he was not prepared to make even interim concessions, as his long struggle against the patriotic school in Ireland shows. He judged his own work, too, by standards which displayed at once his dislike of what had become popular and his desire that popular taste and good art should be able to join hands across the widening gulf. Dorothy Wellesley tells a story of his distress and irritation when he was asked to recite " Innisfree " ; he equated his work in one poem with that of Landor and Donne, types of non-popular poets. At the same time, he was delighted when the guests at a banquet joined in singing " The Curse of Cromwell." His work on ballads and broadsheets was an attempt at creating appreciation for poetry that could be understood and sung by peasants. But the peasants and the culture that they typified had long ago vanished into limbo. Yeats' work in this respect was really carried out on two fronts ; he tried to mould the popular mind into the shape that he desired and at the same time supply the art that would be appropriate to the culture that such a mind would demand. The effort was thus self-defeating. It was the old problem that his master William Morris had encountered, but Yeats stood up to it more bravely than had Morris, who, wearing by turns the mask of the Socialist propagandist and the mask of the " idle singer of an empty day," had found happiness in living a double life. Yeats never entirely gave up single-mindedness. But the kind of art he wanted and the kind of culture that an industrial civilization was inexorably shaping were not in any way compatible. Yeats still thought in terms of the heroic Bard : in " The Curse of Cromwell " the poet is the " servant " of the swordsmen and the ladies. In the end, Yeats came to share, for different reasons, the more restricted viewpoint of his contemporaries, making his " Old Man " in *The Death of Cuchulain* say :

> I am sure that as I am producing a play for people I like, it is not probable, in this vile age, that they will be more in number than those who listened to the first performance of Milton's *Comus* . . . If there are more than a hundred I won't be able to escape people who are educating themselves out of the Book Societies and the like, sciolists all, pickpockets and opinionated bitches.

Moreover, even the folk-types which are scattered about the plays are not really a means of approach to the popular mind, although superficially they might appear to be so. Whatever their origin in the life of Ireland and their relationship to the work of Synge and Gregory, they are rapidly absorbed into the vortex of Yeats' personal task. It is true that they begin their career in the plays by performing a limited and traditional set of functions. In *On Baile's Strand*, for example, as we have seen, the Fool and the Blind Man act as foils to the heroic characters ; their preoccupation with bread and chickens is in a sense more " real " than Cuchulain's pre-occupation with love and war. Perhaps their chief function is to bestow on the play a formal patterning, at once to point its irony and throw into high relief the heroic, stately gestures. In the same way, painters of Crucifixion or martyrdom put in background or foreground dogs, horses, or children running races. In one of El Greco's pictures the eye is deflected from the figure of Christ to that of a carpenter, bending down in the foreground, who is absorbed in boring a hole into one of the arms of the Cross.

The Pot of Broth (1904) shows that Yeats interest in the folk-character was not necessarily confined to its function as foil, though no doubt the play was intended to be performed—as it frequently was—in company with more serious pieces. Yeats did not, however, make any sustained attempt to occupy the kingdom that belonged by right of talent to Synge and Lady Gregory. In both *On Baile's Strand* and *The Hour Glass* (1914) the Fool shows Shakespeare's influence ; he is a Child of God, given to singing nonsense verses—but in the latter play his function is a little more complex. Long before the Wise Man has his revelation of an angel and is converted to belief in God, the Fool has " seen plenty of angels." " What were they all but fools before I came ? " boasts the philosopher. The fool in this play typifies the ancient wisdom of the folk ; he stands too for all those aspects of peasant belief and traditional sensibility which a materialist thought has driven away—" even those that used to dream of angels dream now of other things." The Fool is thus an important aspect of Yeats' own credo ; Yeats too wished to believe in angels—" all about us there seems to start up a precise inexplicable teeming life," as he had written in the introduction to *The Words upon the*

Window Pane. The appearance of the angel is not just a device in a play but precisely the same kind of manipulation of the metaphysical order as the medium who speaks in Swift's voice or the phantom with the beating heart. It is a mistake, therefore, to regard the folk-types in Yeats' plays and the humour associated with them as appeals to the groundlings. Gerald Heard, whose writings were known to Yeats, has argued that the Fool type shares the awful distinction of the Delphic prophetess: both are antennae of a submerged consciousness, valued by a highly-ordered society precisely because it has lost the knowledge of that consciousness. The existence of the Fool, alike in Shakespeare and Yeats, is an indication of a sophisticated culture, not the reverse. (Kings, not lesser men, employed fools).

Yeats saw the fool as indifferent to the directions of the will, whereas other men are bound by will and the consciousness of death. In " The Hour before Dawn," the " cursing rogue with a merry face " who stumbles upon Cruachan's plain (and who later evolves into a definite fool-type as Tom O'Roughley and Tom of Cruachan) demands only the natural life :

> I'd have merry life enough
> If a good Easter wind were blowing.

He rejects the death-consciousness affirmed by the sleeper in lines that recall " The Wheel " :

> You cry aloud, O would 'twere spring
> Or that the wind would shift a point,
> And do not know that you would bring,
> If time were suppler in the joint,
> Neither the spring nor the south wind
> But the hour when you shall pass away.

Because of the absence of will, the fool is aimless : and it is " in this aimlessness that he finds his joy " (*A Vision*, p. 182) :

> Though logic-choppers rule the town,
> And every maid and man and boy
> Has marked a distant object down,
> An aimless joy is a pure joy.
>
> (" Tom O'Roughley ".)

But the absence of will has also a contrary implication. In *A Vision* the fool is the type of the twenty-eighth phase and

therefore wears two masks. One implies aimless joy, the other aimless malignancy, and it is this latter which is emphasized in the last of the fool plays, *The Herne's Egg*, and also in *The Death of Cuchulain*, where the blind man, another folk-type, plays a similar role. The Fool is thus united to the cyclical system: the folk-character which began as a reflection of a popular image, moves into the world of abstract thought and emerges from it as a mythological type. In *On Baile's Strand* the fool had played the part of foil to the heroic characters; in *The Death of Cuchulain* he stands on the same level as the hero and has the power to destroy him. In *The Herne's Egg* all the characters share the gross realism of the literary folk-type proper; both nobleman and beggar live the same life. The fact is a reflection of Yeats' thought, an effect deliberately achieved. This is unity of culture; Yeats sincerely wanted to drive everything representing bourgeois culture out of his art. We may say that he welcomed the threats of violence that culminated in war, because he thought that war was the thing most feared by the middle classes and that it would in a large measure destroy them. Yeats saw civilization, whether through collectivism or Fascism, returning to the old fixed hierarchical modes, while the middle classes in one last quixotic gesture gave their lives to preventing what must happen. Yeats was, however, neither politician nor sociologist; he saw with the eyes of a poet, and of a poet whose work holds a very large content of directive metaphysical thinking. In *The Herne's Egg* both nobleman and beggar kneel and tremble before unknown spiritual forces; the Morrigu, in *The Death of Cuchulain*, is another such force. Beneath the jokes and the swearing, and the racy, sexy, satirical life, the fire beneath its film of ash, lies the incandescence of the "uncontrollable mystery," the "precise, inexplicable, teeming life," which can only manifest itself when the hierarchical pattern of society has produced the spiritual awareness that lies fallow in a world of "sciolists, pickpockets and opinionated bitches":

> Many times man lives and dies
> Between his two eternities,
> That of race and that of soul.

Yeats had already parted company with his middle-class contemporaries who feared the destruction of the present order;

and it was precisely at this point that he parted company with those of his contemporaries who welcomed the approach of the new pattern and whose basic materialism discovered in it the promise of fulfilment for their fondest hopes.

Yeats further developed these thoughts in the "little, mechanical songs" which are found in *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* and *Last Poems* under the titles "A Man Young and Old," "A Woman Young and Old," and "Words for Music Perhaps." These songs are the summit of the poetic mountain, not only in time, but in the sense that they are Yeats' crystallization of his thought and feeling about poetry and life. Because they are indeed as organic and perdurable as diamond, it is difficult to trace in them separate strands of thought or feeling or much logical connectiveness. Like some poems by Marvell or Donne, everything is fused into the single stone. The following is a good example of the swiftness of movement from thought to image:

> "Love is all
> Unsatisfied
> That cannot take the whole
> Body and soul;"
> And that is what Jane said.
>
> "Take the sour
> If you take me,
> I can scoff and lour
> And scold for an hour."
> "That's certainly the case," said he.
>
> "Naked I lay,
> The grass my bed;
> Naked and hidden away,
> That black day;"
> And that is what Jane said.
>
> "What can be shown?
> What true love be?
> All could be known or shown
> If Time were but gone."
> "That's certainly the case," said he.

Although each stanza of this poem makes sense, the poem as a whole is not "about" anything easily definable; it is not even concerned with the poet's emotions, as "Resolution and

Independence" is with Wordsworth's, or "Lycidas" with Milton's, although it draws a certain emotional colouring, as most of these poems do, from its form. The refrain is reminiscent of a nursery-rhyme;[1] the last stanza is made up almost entirely of heavily-accented monosyllables like the tolling of a bell. But behind this simplicity a conflict is hidden. The last stanza is a microcosm which reflects the macrocosm of all these poems—love, time, and their reconciliation. This was the subject of Yeats' last poetic work.

In some of the poems time is seen as the enemy of love, because the loss of youth must destroy the power of love;

> Earth in beauty dressed
> Awaits returning spring,
> All true love must die,
> Alter at the best
> Into some lesser thing.
> *Prove that I lie.*
>
> Such body lovers have,
> Such exacting breath,
> That they touch or sigh.
> Every touch they give,
> Love is nearer death.
> *Prove that I lie.*

This theme is developed in particular in the two groups entitled "A Man Young and Old" and "A Woman Young and Old," in which the speaker of the verse emphasizes the isolation and the lovelessness of old age, whose only life subsists in memory ("His Wildness"), an old peasant brooding over dead stories:

> And what had drowned a lover once
> Sounds like an old song.

Yeats' sense of the past is comparable with Hardy's in that it goes deeper than a lifetime, correlating classical legend with village myth ("His Memories"), just as Hardy's yeoman is shadowed by his distant forebears that have trod the same ground and worn down the same door-sill. The poignancy of this theme is perfectly expressed in the "Girl's Song":

[1] See Macneice's analysis of the use of the refrain, *op. cit.*, pp. 164–9.

I went out alone
To sing a song or two,
My fancy on a man,
And you know who.

Another came in sight
That on a stick relied
To hold himself upright;
I sat and cried.

And that is all my song
When everything is told,
Saw I an old man young
Or young man old?

Housman was similarly preoccupied with the "death of every brilliant eye," but his elegiac note is soured by what seems an obsession rather than a comprehension and by a fixation on classical antiquity. In all three of the poems I have just quoted the elegiac strain predominates; all the statements resolve themselves into interrogations, which leave hanging in the air melancholy cadences, a dying fall which is unlike anything in the later Yeats but is close to the spirit of the early poems. The very stuff of these early poems, even when the subject was ostensibly gay, as in "The Fiddler of Dooney", was melancholy nostalgia, the calling of the "narrow graves". The qualification in "The Fiddler of Dooney" is typical:

For the good are always the merry,
Save by an evil chance.

Behind the dancing and the music lies this evil chance, the "longing for the tomb"; Hardy similarly is always conscious of how permeable is the barrier between pain and pleasure, how they exist only by each other's sufferance. What indeed is Othello's great cry of happiness but an inscrutable qualification of all happiness?—

My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another moment like to this
Succeeds in unknown Fate.

The unknown Fate for Yeats is the hostile power of time. As he had written earlier:

My contemplations are of Time
That has transfigured me.
(*The Rose:* "Lamentation of the Old Pensioner".)

And in " A Woman Young and Old " and " A Man Young and Old," he continued this contemplative poetic work. Like all great elegiac works of this kind, the " Girl's Song " rises from the particular to the general and expresses with other modern poems of a similarly deceptive simplicity—the " Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries," Hopkins' " Margaret, are you grieving . . . . "—the " sadness of the creatures," the grief-consciousness that Virgil dropped like a stone into the glittering pool of Empire—" Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt."

The reconciliation with time is effected in a form which is dictated by the in-flowing of the passionate memories of old age upon this elegiac consciousness. " Her Vision in the Wood " is a good example of the sort of poem which occurs when all these strands join, just as the character called Crazy Jane symbolizes this reconciliation and contains within herself the elements that bring it about. " Her Vision in the Wood " is quite different formally and technically from the mechanical songs, and this helps to point its focal position in the critical interpretation of these poems. The meaning of the poem seems to be as follows : an old woman (perhaps Crazy Jane herself) stands in a wood trying to recall the experience and passion of sexual love (the loss of which is the supreme example of the transfiguring power of time). She sees in a vision a troop of mourning women who carry a litter bearing a wounded man :

> All stately women moving to a song
> With loosened hair or foreheads grief-distraught,
> It seemed a Quattrocento painter's throng,
> A thoughtless image of Mantegna's thought—
> Why should they think that are for ever young ?

The wounded man turns to look at the woman, and, in a terrible moment, she realizes that he is " no fabulous symbol," but her lover himself. Though it is not stated in the poem, it is plain that the mourning women are the Sidhe, and that the mortal man has been with them as Oisin was with Niamh. He has gained youth, but not immortality, and is dying of his wound. While the poem is about love, it is chiefly about time : time has changed one lover but not her passionate memory, while the other has remained untouched but must die. Passion and memory—or, to put it in another way, the power

of love and the individual consciousness of time—form a bridge into a new experience, but an experience which occurs immediately before death, at a moment when the elegiac consciousness is at its most intense. For the elegiac consciousness here is more than the sum-total of all memories,

> . . . memories of love,
> Memories of the words of women,
> All those things whereof
> Man makes a superhuman
> Mirror-resembling dream.

It sharpens the power of memory to the point at which the passionate act is lived over again; "love's bitter-sweet had all come back."

This reconciliation with time, this recreation of the passionate event, is given an extended poetic life in the character of Crazy Jane. It is the reverse side of the emotional and poetic purpose which Yeats had set forth in the poem in which the lines quoted above appear. Then Yeats had written:

> Now shall I make my soul
> Compelling it to study
> In a learned school
> Till the wreck of body,
> Slow decay of blood,
> Testy delirium
> Or dull decrepitude,
> Or what worse evil come—
> The death of friends, or death
> Of every brilliant eye,
> That made a catch in the breath—
> Seem but the clouds of the sky
> When the horizon fades;
> Or a bird's sleepy cry
> Among the deepening shades. ("The Tower", III).

It is true that Crazy Jane represents the natural impulses that struggled against this solution, but she also represents more importantly the triumph over everything in time that seemed to make such a solution inevitable. For she is often shown as natural vigour incarnate and unrepentant, but also as old age similarly unrepentant though fully aware of impending death, and deriving the sweetness of her triumph from the knowledge

that old age has brought not defeat but a reconciliation with time—a reconciliation whereby old age is forced to accept the terms of the natural life of youthful desire. Beyond death and time, Crazy Jane reiterates, lies the reality of the natural life, which illumines age :

> What can be shown ?
> What true love be ?
> All could be known or shown
> If Time were but gone.

and :

> I gave what other women gave
> That stepped out of their clothes,
> But when this soul, its body off,
> Naked to naked goes,
> He it has found shall find therein
> What none other knows.

This reconciliation seems to be the meaning of " Those Dancing Days are Gone " and " Young Man's Song " :

> Uplift those eyes and throw
> Those glances unafraid :
> She would as bravely show
> Did all the fabric fade ;
> No withered crone I saw
> Before the world was made.

The theme of " Before the World was Made," another song in " A Woman Young and Old," is a similar search for the emotional experience lying beyond time. For this poetry, too, is a search ; old age is a mask which hides but does not destroy the values of youthful love, and the task is to discard this " beggarly habiliment." ("Meeting".) Even this wish is the source of conflict in both these poems and the last poems, and the struggle is between what is conceived as " truth " and natural desire. The search for Truth is seen as the task of old age :

> Grant me an old man's frenzy,
> Myself must I remake,
> Till I am Timon and Lear
> Or that William Blake
> Who beat upon the wall
> Till Truth obeyed his call.

(" An Acre of Grass". *Last Poems.*)

and yet the woman young and old says :

> I long for truth, and yet
> I cannot stay from that
> My better self disowns,
> For a man's attention
> Brings such satisfaction
> To the craving in my bones.

The poem entitled " The Wild Old Wicked Man " in *Last Poems* is really a dialogue between these two sets of values, where God becomes a sort of Urizen, set up in opposition to desire. (It is a curious fact that many years earlier Yeats gave St. Patrick and Oisin very similar roles in *The Wanderings of Oisin*).

Sexual desire in these poems comes to be valued as the most intense form of natural delight, and therefore as symbol and summary of all the processes of natural life. To be deprived of this delight is the worst drouth of all :

> A crazy man that found a cup
> When all but dead of thirst,
> Hardly dared to wet his mouth
> Imagining, moon-accursed,
> That another mouthful
> And his beating heart would burst.
> October last I found it too
> But found it dry as bone,
> And for that reason I am crazed
> And my sleep is gone. ("A Man Young and Old".)

The affirmations of " A Woman Young and Old " and Crazy Jane's songs about her dead lover are the filling of this cup ; and within this context sexual love has many significances, as a compensation for the crime of being born (" Consolation ") or as a kind of cosmic annunciation (" Chosen "). The sexual mystery—the conception and birth of the God—at the heart of Christianity was the feature that Yeats seized upon and elaborated in his thinking about that religion. Around this shining fire stand all kinds of thwarting shadows—Urizen, old age and the inexorable process of Time as reflected in the individual, delusion and madness as in the poem entitled "The Friends of his Youth," where the spectacle induces hysteria :

And then I laugh till tears run down
And the heart thumps at my side,
Remembering that her shriek was love
And that he shrieks from pride.

Love, sharpened by the elegiac consciousness and the knowledge of these thwarting powers, is able, as we have seen from " Her Vision in the Wood," momentarily to

Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps us pale . . . ,

to rescue a portion of existence from the knowledge of death, and on this its true vitality and reality depend. In " Chosen " love is a struggle for an image, and "daybreak", in this poem and in " Parting " and in the refrain to " The Wild Old Wicked Man", is taken as the point at which time-consciousness becomes most insistent and hardest to struggle against, and therefore the point at which all the forces of love choose to give battle to the power of time and where they win their victory and reconciliation :

I struggled with the horror of daybreak,
I chose it for my lot !

Daybreak for Yeats—besides the usual literary associations—was also the time when the moon resigned its task to the " timid sun," where " dark between the polecat and the owl " and the " rich, dark nothing " yielded to the light of common day.

The forms which Yeats chose to express this complex of thought and emotion, of private image and popular fantasy, are significant and have a bearing on one aspect of the search for a mythology. In the most distinguished of his other poems, such as " In Memory of Major Robert Gregory " and " Byzantium," the poems of what may be termed the classical period (although chronology hardly enters in), Yeats spoke in his own person, and showed us the landscape through the glass of his own elaborate, introspective, self-conscious personality. In the mechanical songs the direct voice has ceased and all is obliquity. The woman and the man young and old, and Crazy Jane, are abstractions from a part of his personal experience—abstractions which become endowed with their own life and being. In them, the personal experience and the reflective

general mind meet—the personal and the abstract cohere once more. The personæ of these poems are mythological characters, like Cuchulain, like Robert Gregory. Their obliquity is perhaps more pronounced, for they are the product of a greater selectivity from the poet's personal experience. Bowra (in *The Heritage of Symbolism*) says that in these last poems Yeats spoke without inhibitions, a whole man, "frankly and enjoyably himself." In one sense, as we have seen,[1] this is true—but what do we mean when we speak of a poet's self? For if we include in this formula his singing robes, all that style and manner which *is* his personality when he is speaking *ex cathedra* —everything that manifests itself in, for example, "The Meditations on Civil War"—then, when that manner and style is sometimes shed, as it is in these mechanical songs, the poet's "self" is diminished by that much. Within the context of a highly developed literary tradition, this partial abandonment of the individual stance may mean the production of an art technically and formally more simple and nearer to the "folk." This, I think, is what has happened with the Crazy Jane type of poem: that the transformation is not quite complete appears now and again from an unassimilated or unassimilable thought or image hailing from the grand manner. A similar phenomenon may be marked if the Shakespeare who wrote the chronicles and the tragedies is compared with the Shakespeare who wrote "When that I was and a little tiny boy." These poems of Yeats are really Fools' songs, and we must remember that the Fool holds a strange position in the phasal system. As we have seen, he is without will, "obeying obscure, unconscious fantasies," expressing aimless joy or aimless malignancy. This description is one which Yeats continually, albeit half-consciously, applies to two things—to the fool himself as a phasal type and a poetic creation, and to the folk-mind. In reality, they are indistinguishable—the original Fool *is* a representative of the folk-consciousness; the grandee, drawn from a higher stage of consciousness, perhaps a victorious invader, keeps a fool by him because the fool represents that consciousness at an earlier stage of development, at once more primitive and more sensitized to the message of the gods.

These twin ideas of the Fool and the folk-mind seem to lie all the time at the back of the mechanical songs, controlling

[1] See Chapter II above.

more than is superficially apparent, their form and content. The folk-mind, whose fascination for Yeats had begun when he collected the material for *The Celtic Twilight*, if not long before in his childish experience in the Sligo countryside, returns, disguised, to its place in his art. Crazy Jane is Mary Battle, the old servant in the Yeats family who saw the " little people," as well as " Daft Mary," who walked in Sligo. The presence of the folk-mind accounts for the elegiac note which calls so loudly in many of these poems, just as it also explains the melancholy of the *Twelfth Night* songs. The elegiac consciousness is the product of a general and communal grief, the kind of perception that Yeats meant when he wrote:

> Many times man lives and dies
> Between his two eternities,
> That of race and that of soul,
> And ancient Ireland knew it all.

Ancient Ireland remains for Yeats the best example of the folk-mind, functioning in its proper sphere, equipped with its mysterious knowledge. The grief-consciousness of the folk springs up not round the death of the individual but round the decay of the group. Its art, therefore, when it turns to these subjects, is not a tragic art, according to the classic definition of tragedy as the agon of the individual, but an elegiac art, for an elegy is a lamentation for the dead, for what is past. By that very act of lamentation we mourn not so much out of pity for the dead individual, but out of pity for ourselves, for our community, for our tribe, or, in elegies of a high stage of development, for the tribe that is the world, for the "sadness of the creatures." Hence arise the greatest triumphs of the elegiac poet, when he is able to join within one setting the grief-consciousness of the folk-mind and the ever-renewing renascent energies of the tribe (to which death is a challenge that is met or rejected according to the weakness or strength of the whole tribal body). This is what Milton did in "Lycidas ":

> For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead,
> Sunk though he be beneath the watery floor,
> So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed . . .

where a great image drawn from nature speaks directly to that of the folk-mind which remains in all of us. And this also is

what Yeats is doing, on a less heroic scale, in the Crazy Jane songs, where the mythological types are able, as we have seen, to mirror within themselves the passage of time and death and yet to derive from the same source the means of " triumph," personifying through sexual love the rising of Milton's day-star. The achievement is a partial one, but it seems certain that on it the force and beauty of these poems rest. Yeats had, obliquely, fulfilled the " dream of the noble and the beggar-man," enriching his art by " contact with the soil " of the folk-consciousness. Ultimately, then, the mechanical songs are seen to be in line with that which had at first motivated the search for a mythology—the desire for unity of culture and of being, and for a comprehensible universal Order, ideas which had prompted Yeats to write *A Vision* as well as the poems that spring therefrom. As Hölderlin observed :

> Upwards my soul aspired, but soon
> Love drew it down ; suffering humbled it more ;
> So I hasten round the curve
> Of life, and return whence I began.

Conclusion

> Escaped by luck from suicidal faction
> And in the core of ruin sat aloof,
> Surviving only as an art or myth.
>
> Roy Fuller.

Our study of Yeats' search for a mythology would have little point unless it helped to place this poet within the perspective of contemporary literature. We must avoid here the attempt to over-categorize, and, in the case of Yeats, it is easier to do so, because, of all the poets of his time, Yeats is—with some few and perhaps unimportant exceptions—the most atypical. On the other hand, in this final chapter the luxury of generalization is not only permissible but enjoined, and in generalizing about literature and mythology, we advance over largely unexplored terrain.

As we have seen from this study, Yeats' work has two striking characteristics which help to differentiate it. The first is the complete " Otherness " of the thought that lies behind most of the poetry. I have suggested, however, that this thought and the system that eventually evolved from it arose out of a series of needs which were common to Yeats' contemporaries and which still remain to haunt modern consciousness. This presumably is what Eliot meant when he spoke of Yeats as :

> One of those few whose history is the history of our own time, who are a part of the consciousness of their age, which cannot be understood without them.[1]

Why, then, did Yeats' solution for the contemporary problems take a form so sharply individual ? The superficial causes are fairly easily traced. Yeats' rejection of orthodox philosophical and scientific speculation, his interest in spiritualism which sprang from his Irish childhood, his love of the esoteric, all help to lend *A Vision* its peculiar character. But on a profounder level, it was poetic need which dictated the form of the

[1] A memorial speech at Dublin, quoted by Hone, *Life*, p. 279.

thought. That is to say, as a poet, Yeats needed a metaphysical order which would have all the coherence of a metaphysic and all the personalism of a religion. This helps to distinguish Yeats from those of his contemporaries who made their poetry out of the shattered values themselves, like Eliot with his "heap of broken images," or from those who in a time of chaos saw their work as the advancement of consciousness, the "flowering of our inwardness," like Rilke. Yeats' position therefore carries with it many disadvantages, because one of its consequences is a deliberate turning away from the contemporary scene, a certain unawareness once the need has been satisfied in the systemic solution. Hence the effect of many of the later poems—"no representation of the living world, but the dream of a somnambulist."

Within its dream, however, the somnambulistic vision is sharp and clear. Outside its range often pathetically blurred, within it focuses more intensely upon the objects of the dream landscape.

> O Crist . . . that art in blisse,
> Fro fantom and illusioun
> Me save!

wrote Chaucer when the Eagle appeared in the deserts of consciousness ; but Yeats' cultivation of the vision is the more intense for being cut off from what he described as the "market-place." This is the second differentiating characteristic of Yeats' poetry. Within the self-chosen barriers the poetic images have the solidity of sense-objects :

> Although I saw it all by the moon's light,
> Now in its fifteenth night,
> There can be nothing solider til I die.

This solidity is the most essential characteristic of Yeats' style in its richest and maturest form. The language is full and rounded, each word moulded by the pressure of its neighbours until line or stanza form themselves with incomparable majesty and assurance. It is a sensuous music which gains its effects not by dissemination but by concentration.

Yeats' historical position is less easily defined, and we cannot examine it for long without coming to realize that that

mysterious word " symbolism " lurks behind almost every phase of the analysis. In an interesting and well-argued essay Stephen Spender has traced the historical development of poetic symbolism. The categories which he includes within this term are perhaps too numerous, but he is obviously right in regarding the poetry of Baudelaire and Mallarmé as the end of a process which has had as its result the gradual exhaustion of poetic meaning. Significance has drained away from the reservoirs of religion and myth on which the poet is accustomed to draw, and as a result the symbol becomes exalted independently of any system of metaphysics :

> Un jour vient où le poète, privé des symboles extérieurs acceptés par une société qui croit unanimement en un monde invisible aussi bien qu'au monde visible, a épuisé tous les symboles de la déraison subjective ; ce jour-là les symboles deviennent en eux-mêmes une fin poetique. Leur mystère ne réside plus en ce qu'ils évoquent, comme la Croix, une histoire familière à toute l'humanité—ni (comme le rossignol de Keats) le désespoir du poète. Ils n'ont plus de rapport, autant que c'est possible, avec aucune réalité, objective ni subjective. Ils deviennent objets de pure contemplation, et leur mystère est celui d'un art capable de produire des oeuvres isolées, détachées, et pourtant belles.[1]

As we have seen, Yeats' participation in this process is by no means confined to those early poems that were hailed with delight by Arthur Symons in 1899. But in these later poems, the distinction that Spender makes between " symbolisme pur " et " symbolisme traditionnel " is rendered complex by a third factor which he does not take into account. Speaking of " The Second Coming " Spender writes :

> Le symbolisme " pur " apparaît dans l'invention frappante d'une image pour ainsi dire autonome ; le symbolisme traditionnel, et aussi l'intention prophétique, apparaissent dans la façon dont le poète associe cette image terrifiante à l'idée de la naissance de Christ.

There is more in " The Second Coming " than this. As we have seen, the shape with a lion body and the head of a man is associated with Yeats' spiritualistic experiences (first, during a

[1] S. Spender, " La Crise des Symboles". *La France Libre*, VII, 39, p. 207.

seance at Mather's house, and then during the composition of *The Resurrection*). Furthermore, the idea of the birth of a new revelation is fundamental to the cyclical interpretation of history which finds expression in *A Vision*.

> And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born ?

is a question which loses a great deal of its power unless we realize that behind it lies more than the attraction of a foundered belief and a famous name. A system of mythology is there as well—a system which to Yeats was more elaborate and full of meaning than Christianity itself and within which Christianity was seen as only one phase among the ever-recurring phases which swing between the " fabulous formless darkness " and the solid illumination of the Fifteenth Night. We must add the mythological system to the two kinds of symbolism, which become the less pure and the less traditional once they are recognized for what they are—images which are drawn from the inner landscape of the private myth, and which can only be fully understood by reference to the deserts and cities of the poet's mind.

The system was an answer to needs and questions. Much of the work is free of its influence, but its importance needs to be stressed if only because modern criticism prefers to forget about it. Baudelaire's " grand trou " *had* opened under Yeats' feet, for he shared the contemporary burden, and in old age Yeats was interested in those poets whose work gave evidence of a like preoccupation with an answer to the external disorder; nor is his description of *The Waste Land* as a " long philosophical poem " so entirely off the mark as it might at first sight appear :

> I think profound philosophy must come from terror. An abyss opens under our feet; inherited convictions, the presuppositions of our thoughts, those Fathers of the Church Lionel Johnson expounded, drop into the abyss. Whether we will or no we must ask the ancient questions : Is there reality anywhere ? Is there a God ? Is there a Soul ? We cry with the Indian Sacred Book : " They have put a golden stopper into the neck of the bottle : pull it ! Let out reality ! "[1]

[1] " National Lecture on Modern Poetry." *The Listener*, XVI, p. 739 (and in *Essays* 1931–36).

The method by which Yeats chose to answer these questions was entirely invalid if we suppose that he asked them because he wanted to supply the answers for the use of others; but the answers had power to fulfill his own needs and those of his poetry. Instead of clambering about, like Baudelaire, on the sinking hulls of European belief, Yeats preferred to construct a raft whose accommodation was severely limited to one. His work therefore did nothing towards recreating the natural sources which had dried up. The major question arises: How much longer can poetry remain alive when those sources no longer exist? Yeats' achievement would seem to supply no unequivocal answer, but the phenomenon remains, although scientist or sociologist may declare that it should never have occurred:—

> And yonder in the gymnasts' garden thrives
> The self-sown, self-begotten shape that gives
> Athenian intellect its mastery,
> Even the grey-leaved olive-tree
> Miracle-bred out of the living stone;
> Nor accident of peace nor war
> Can wither that old marvel, for
> The great grey-eyed Athena stares thereon.
>
> ("Colonus' Praise".)

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[1] Except where otherwise stated, all the volumes mentioned were published by Messrs. Macmillan and Co.

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NOTE

Owing to war-time and subsequent difficulties the bibliography is necessarily incomplete. I have not seen the studies by Gurd (1916 : Lancaster, U.S.A.) on *The Early Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, nor those of J. H. Pollock (1935 : Dublin) and J. M. Hone (1916 : Dublin); and have only cursorily examined the studies by Forrest Reid (1915) and C. L. Wrenn (1920 : Durham). More worth than some books is a visit to the Kelvingrove Gallery, Glasgow, where hangs Augustus John's portrait of Yeats as an old man, perhaps the finest of all the numerous representations of the poet—" a great ebullient portrait certainly." There is also the remarkable photograph by Nora S. Heald, reproduced in the *London Mercury* Yeats number listed above. P.U.

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